MEADOWLARK BASIN

B·M·BOWER

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Smoky Ford had never seen anything like it.

FRONTISPIECE. *See page* 48.

Meadowlark Basin

BY

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CHIP OF THE FLYING-U,
THE EAGLE'S WING,
DESERT BREW, ETC.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	Lark Rustles a Boy	1
II	Smallpox Has Its Uses	12
III	Lark Does a Little Branding	28
IV	Bud	42
V	The Sign of the Golden Arrow	56
VI	Bud Does a Little Rustling	68
VII	Ways and Means	74
VIII	Bud Holds Council with Himself	87
IX	Butch Cassidy Gives Advice	101
X	The Frying Pan	117
XI	Bud Takes a Trail of His Own	129
XII	The Meadowlark Boys Have a Plan	142
XIII	Bud Finds the Stolen Money	157
XIV	"Something's About Due to Pop!"	172
XV	"Jelly" Gets in Action	181
XVI	"Who Shot Bat and Ed White"	195
XVII	"Bud and Jelly; One or Both"	209
XVIII	Bud Goes After Butch	220
XIX	"Next Time, Remember—Butch Packs Two Guns!"	234

Contents

CHAPTER		PAGE
XX	"Things Kinda Slipped Up" . . .	246
XXI	Lark Would Have Done Things Differently	254
XXII	Eavesdropper	269
XXIII	"Disarm the Prisoner!" . . .	283
XXIV	Snowball Testifies	292

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CHAPTER ONE

LARK RUSTLES A BOY

On the brow of the hill the horse Lark was riding stepped aside from the trail, walked to the very edge of the rim and stood there, gravely looking down into the valley. Where he stood the young grass was cut and crushed into the loose soil with shod hoofprints closely intermingled, proof that the slight detour was a matter of habit born of many pausings there at gaze. Except on pitch-black nights or when he rode in haste, Lark never failed to stop and drink his fill of the wide valley below,—in his opinion the most beautiful spot on earth.

Straight down, a good four hundred feet below him, lay the bottomland known the country over as Meadowlark Basin, where old Bill Larkin had his stronghold in the old days. Across the wide meadows the Little Smoky River went whirling past like a millrace, the piled hills crowded close

upon the farther bank. At the head of the Basin, nearly a mile away, other hills shouldered one another and the rumbling storm clouds just above; beyond all, the mountains with white peaks and purple canyons gashed the dark splotches of wooded slopes.

"Is down there — where we're goin'?" The small boy sitting within the circle of Lark's arms, his small legs spread across the saddle in front of Lark's long legs, pointed a soft, brown finger toward the valley below.

"You betchuh." One of Lark's arms snuggled the boy closer.

"Is all them horses — your horses?"

"Bet they are. Ain't they purty down there? Look at all them spraddly colts, son. Ain't they the purtiest sight you ever saw?"

"O-oh, one colt kicked its — its mamma!" The boy slapped his hands together and chuckled. "Can — can I have one colt — to ride?"

"Bet you can! Ain't it purty down there? Look at that green patch over next the river. That's lucerne. And up above there is the spuds, a different green yet. And that's timothy and clover on beyond. Listen, son. Hear 'em? Meddalarks and frogs singin' a contest. Frogs is ahead, got all the best of it so far, 'cause they

sing all night and the meddalarks lays off till daybreak."

"Can — can I have a frog —"

"Have to ask missis frog about that, son. Better shack along and get home ahead of the storm. See that lightnin' scootin' along up there among the hills; ain't it purty? Be blowin' rain in our faces if we don't hurry." Lark twitched the reins and the horse swung back to the trail that dipped down into a green fold of the encircling hills, shutting off their view of everything save the ink-black clouds with greenish-brown lights here and there that were swiftly blotting out the blue above their heads.

"Tired?" Lark bent his head to look into the flushed face of the youngster.

The boy shook his head, not wanting to confess. He wriggled one arm loose and wiped the dusty beads of perspiration from cheeks and brow, glancing up anxiously into Lark's eyes.

"They — can't find me here, can they?" He looked at the rock walls on either side with a certain satisfaction in their solid gray, as if they were put there for his especial protection.

"No," said Lark grimly. "They'll never git yuh away from here, son."

The boy heaved a great sigh and looked at the

storm and the narrow pass and down at the twitching ears of the horse. The hard muscles of Lark's left arm pressed him close. He sighed again and drooped a bit in the embrace. It had been a long, hard ride that lasted through the night and half of the day, and, deny it as he would, he was tired to the middle of his bones.

At the foot of the steep, narrow pass the horse broke into a shambling trot, and once he whinnied eagerly. They brought up in a grassless, hard-packed space between two corrals, and Lark loosened his hold and swung stiffly from the saddle. His face was drawn and his eyes sunken as if he too were very tired.

"Well, here we are, son." He grinned and pulled the boy out of the saddle, setting him on his feet at a safe distance from the horse.

The boy's feet were like wooden clubs. He sat down with unexpected abruptness in the dirt. Over by the corral a man laughed.

"Still dragging in slick-ears; where did you find this one, Lark?"

Lark eyed the speaker across the saddle he was uncinching.

"In the wrong corral, Bud. Havin' the heart kicked outa him — game little cuss. Fit to wear our brand. Better take him up to the house and

feed him and put him to bed. Been in the saddle since nine o'clock last night, Bud."

Bud lounged over to them — a slim, handsome youth with the peculiar, stilted walk of the cowboy — and bent smiling over the child, gathering the little body up in his arms.

"Shall I bed him with that broken-legged cougar, or nest him with the young eagle, or down in the calf corral, or where?" he bantered. "The Meddalark's about full up with orphan babies right now. How do you grade this one?"

"Ask maw. Bet she'll know his stall quick enough." He pulled off the saddle and, with a glance up at the approaching storm, walked to a near-by shed with the heavy, stamped saddle skirts flapping against his legs.

A sudden, blinding glare and rending crash of thunder sent the young fellow scurrying up the path to the one-story ranch house that sprawled against the hill as if it had backed there for shelter and still huddled in fear. Great drops of rain like cold molten bullets spatted into the dust. The young man laughed as he ran, the boy clinging to his neck with two thin arms. They reached the sagging porch just as another flash ripped through the clouds and let loose the full torrent of rain.

Turning to look back, he saw Lark almost at his heels, his broad hat brim flooded with the downpour. The two halted on the porch and stood gazing out at the slanted wall of water, the thunder of it on the porch roof like the deep pounding of surf beating against rocks. Lark stared up at the high plateau beyond the Basin's rim, and his whimsical mouth widened in a satisfied smile.

"This'll wash out every track in the country," he yelled above the uproar. "Needn't have circled through the foothills if I'd known it was comin'."

Bud looked at him, glanced down at the boy now lying in the slackness of deep sleep on his shoulder. He shook his head in vague disapproval.

"Stole him, hunh?"

Lark hunched his wet shoulders, glancing sidelong at the flushed face of the boy.

"Damn' right," he growled. "So would you, Bud — or any man with a heart in him. Why — damn it, they had 'im out in the field, *workin'*. Followin' a big, heavy drag around. Made me so darn sore I just swiped him up into the saddle and rode for the hills." He took off his hat, tilting it so that the water ran out of the curled brim to the steps.

"You sure as hell annexed a bunch of trouble, Lark. Where was it you kidnaped him?"

"Got him off the Palmer ranch. Think he's a grandson of the old man. They'll hunt him, chances are. This rain's a godsend — they'll never track me home."

Bud grinned to himself and turned, carrying his burden inside and laying him on a roomy, cowhide-covered couch where the child sprawled slackly, without a movement of limbs to show he had been disturbed in his sleep. The two men stood looking down at him.

His light brown hair was curly, with damp rings clinging to his forehead. His lashes were long and curled up at the ends, his round face had the deep sun-tan of the prairies. Palmer was called a rich man, but the boy's overalls were faded and old, each knee a gaping, ragged-edged hole. His thin elbows stuck out through the ragged sleeves of a dirty, blue gingham shirt. Lark bent and twitched aside the loose collar, open for want of a button.

"Look at that," he gritted, exposing a long, greenish-blue mark on the shoulder. "Old man Palmer ain't paid for that yet, but he's goin' to some day. The kid won't forget it — I won't *let* 'im forget. You wait till he's full-growed."

"They'll come after him, Lark."

"Let 'em." Lark straightened and hitched up his belt. "Just let 'em try, that's all." His head swung toward a closed door. "Oh, Maw-w!"

Stodgy, flat-footed steps sounded in the next room. The door was pulled open from the farther side and a queer, goblin creature of the female sex looked in, smiling and showing just three lonely teeth in the full expanse of her mouth. Her head would reach to the Bull-Durham tag that dangled from Lark's breast pocket; a large head, much too large for so short a woman. The swelling goiter was not pretty to behold, and her graying hair was combed straight up and twisted into a hard little biscuit on top of her round head. But Lark's eyes softened wonderfully at sight of her, and Bud's lips twitched into a quick smile and his hand reached up automatically to take off his hat.

"What is it, boys? Lark, your coffee'll be ready in a jiffy. I've been keepin' the kettle on ever since breakfast. My, my, what a rain! If it don't wash the garden truck all into the river I'll be thankful. My peas are swimmin' for their lives already."

"Maw, come here." Lark crooked one finger,

and the queer little old woman pattered forward, her face alive with curiosity.

"For the love of Moses!" Maw clasped her hands with a gesture of amazement. "Bill Larkin, what have you been a doing *now?* I'll bet you stole that little feller. I can tell by the gloat in your eyes. Who belongs to him? You never took him away from his mother, did you, Lark? If you did you must carry him right straight back."

Lark laid his hand on the biscuit of hair and gave it a gentle twist.

"Maw, you shut up and go get into your teeth. Want to scare 'im to death when he wakes up? What d'you suppose I went and got you fitted out with teeth for? Does he *look* like he had a mother? By Jonah, if he's got a mother she don't deserve him. Looks like an orphant to me, Maw."

"They'll be hunting him, Lark. You can't drag in boys like you would a calf; *did* you steal this child? You look me in the eye, young feller, and tell the truth."

Lark did not look her in the eye, but he told the truth without speaking one word. He bent, pulled aside the gingham shirt and pointed. Maw looked and turned away her head, sucking in her breath audibly as one does in pain.

"Shall I carry him back where I got him, Maw?"

"No!" Maw shuddered. "The dirty brutes! You fetch him right back into my room. Buddy, you go get that spring cot out of the lean-to, and bring in the top mattress off the spare bed in the wing. I'll rustle bedding myself." She bent and stared hard at the boy's face.

"This looks to me like the boy old Palmer brought home and said he was Dick's boy. If he is, there'll be a ruckus raised that'll make your old father's fingers itch in the grave to be up and shooting. Palmer hangs onto whatever he gets in his clutches, you want to remember that. And he's got a bad bunch around him."

"Well," Lark's lips tightened, "so've I got a bad bunch around me, Maw. I can't look back at a time when folks didn't hesitate some before they tackled the Meddalark outfit."

"The Meddalark never locked horns with old man Palmer yet. Lark, if you take my advice, you'll send a man up to the old lookout your dad fixed on the rim. That's the weak point of the whole Basin, Lark, and you know it. A man could stand up there with a rifle and pick off the whole bunch down here. There'll be trouble over this boy, sure as you live. If you got him away

from Palmer there'll be shooting, and you better oil up your six-gun and get ready for it."

"Why, Maw, you danged old outlaw, you!" Lark laughed. "There wasn't any shootin' when I kidnaped *you*."

"Nobody cared about me, Lark. This is different."

"Yeah," Lark admitted thoughtfully, "mebbe it is."

CHAPTER TWO

SMALLPOX HAS ITS USES

Down through the pass came two riders, drenched with the storm that had lasted through the day, with intermittent gusts of booming wind and vicious lightning, then long, steady downpours as if the whole heavens were awash and there would be no end to the falling water. From the window overlooking the Basin Bud saw them lope heavily into the meadow trail, small geysers of clean rain water thrown up into the sunset glow whenever the horses galloped into a hollow. Bud lounged across the room and put his head into the kitchen.

"Two riders coming, Maw. Better keep that kid out of sight."

Maw nodded, clicking the china white teeth she wore to please Lark. Bud closed the door, glanced toward another behind which Lark was sleeping heavily, and opened it.

"Oh, Lark! Riders coming. What time did you get in last night — if anybody wants to know?"

Lark landed in the middle of the floor, wide-awake as a startled mountain lion. One slim hand went up to pat his hair down into place, the other reached for his gun.

"Left Smoky Ford about three o'clock in the afternoon. Got here along about midnight, didn't I? Maw ought to know." Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and yawned widely. "You go on out, Bud. If it's the boy they're after, you holler to Maw and ask if supper's ready, soon as you hit the porch. Maw and I will look after the kid."

"Craziest thing a man could do," young Bud muttered, as he left the house and walked down the path to meet the riders. His hat was tilted a bit to one side, a cigarette was in his mouth and tilted to the same angle, his thumbs were hooked negligently inside his belt and his three-inch boot heels pegged little holes in the sodden path as he went. Mildly hospitable he looked, with no more interest in their coming than custom demanded of him. But he saw their eyes go slanting this way and that as they approached, and he saw the ganted flanks of their wet horses and the flare of nostrils that told of long, hard riding.

"Howdy, cowboys," he greeted, lounging

closer. "Been out in the dew, haven't you?" He grinned as youth will always grin at the mischance of his fellows.

One lean, unshaven fellow slid out of the saddle and walked stiffly up to Bud, leaving the reins dragging in the wet, steamy muck of the yard. He did not answer the smile.

"We want you folks to get out and help hunt a lost kid," he stated flatly. "Palmer's grandson, it is. Or mebbe your Lark seen him yesterday. Some said he left town yesterday, comin' this way, and he musta passed by the Palmer place 'long about the time the kid disappeared. He might of saw him. He here?"

Bud jerked a thumb over his shoulder toward the house.

"Put up your horses, boys. Jake, over there forking hay, will feed them after you've pulled your saddles. Supper must be about ready. Oh, Jake!" he called, "take care of these horses, will you?" He turned back to the two who were jerking impatiently at wet latigo straps. "Lark didn't say anything about any lost kid, but you can talk to him about it. How about the town folks turning out? They're closer than we are. We'll go, of course."

"The town is out," the short man told him,

grunting a little as he heaved his saddle to a dry spot under the shed. "Been out all night. Old man sent us over here because he seen Lark ride past right where the kid was workin' in the field. Looked like he stopped an' talked to the kid, he said, but it was so fur off he couldn't tell."

Bud turned and walked ahead of them up the path, and now he glanced over his shoulder at the speaker, a curious light in his eyes.

"A kid old enough to work in the field wouldn't get lost, would he?"

The thin man shook his head.

"That's what looked damn queer to me," he assented. "But it's about the only thing that could of happened — unless he was made away with," he added as an afterthought.

"How old a kid is he?" Bud's interest grew a bit keener.

"Eight — mebby nine. Too little to get anywhere on foot."

Bud considered this, shook his head as if the question was beyond him, and stepped upon the porch. "Oh, Maw! Supper ready? Two extra," he shouted, and turned squarely about to scrape his bootsoles across the edge of the porch.

"I'd run away," he said soberly, "if I wasn't

more than eight or nine and had to do a man's work. Doesn't sound right to me." Having scraped all the mud from one boot, he began meticulously to scrape the other. The two from Palmer's followed his example and scraped and scraped, in evident fear of offending a careful housewife.

"Come right in, boys." Maw herself pulled open the door and stood there, smiling and showing the three yellow teeth like stripes dividing the glaring white ones. "Supper's about ready. What's these gentlemen's names, Buddy?"

"You'll have to ask them," Bud replied evenly. "They're in a hurry and upset, and didn't introduce themselves. Bat and Ed, the boys call them. Come on in, boys. They're out hunting a lost child, Maw. They think maybe Lark might have seen him last evening as he was riding out from town."

"Johnson's my name," the thin man introduced himself perfunctorily to maw. "This other man is named White. Is Mr. Larkin in?"

"Come right into the kitchen. Yes, Lark's here, going over his guns after the rain; leaky roof to the closet — Bud, you'd ought to patch that roof right away to-morrow. It was just an accident Lark went into the closet for something

and found all the guns soaking wet. A child lost, did you say? "

"Don't seem to worry folks over this way very much," Johnson observed suspiciously. "How d' do, Lark; seen you in Smoky Ford, you remember."

"*Hel*-lo!" Lark, entrenched behind a table littered with guns, greasy rags, cleaning rods and odorous bottles, looked up and grinned a welcome. "Excuse me for not shakin' hands — coal-oil and bear's grease all over me. What was that, Maw, about a lost child? "

"They want to know if you saw anything of a boy back at Palmer's ranch. Old Palmer saw you ride past there about the time they missed the kid." Bud, pulling chairs to the supper table, spoke more rapidly than was his habit.

"I'll tell it," Johnson interrupted. "It's Palmer's grandson — Dick Palmer's boy. He was out in the field, and the horses come in without 'im. Palmer claims he seen you ride past, and he says you stopped an' talked to the boy. He wasn't seen after that, and the hull country's out lookin' through the hills for 'im. It seemed like you'd oughta know somethin' about 'im." Johnson's eyes clung tenaciously to the ivory-handled, silver-mounted six-shooter that lay close

to Lark's hand on the table. The gun which Lark was working on at the moment was a shotgun, double-barreled and ominous.

"Yeah, I remember that kid." Lark spoke without haste, his eyes on the gunstock he was polishing. "Pore little devil, I rode along and found him hung up at the edge of the field, with the drag caught on a rock when he tried to turn around. He couldn't lift it off, and the team wouldn't pull it off, an' there he was, cryin' because he'd get a lickin' if he broke any teeth outa the harrer, an' if he didn't finish the draggin' along that end of the field, he'd get a lickin'—way he figured it, he was due for a whalin' any way the cat jumped." Lark inspected his work, broke open the gun and shoved in two pinkish cartridges.

"Too small a boy to be away out there, half a mile from the house, tryin' to do a man's work. I got off my horse and heaved the drag off the rock for him, and gave him a bag of gumdrops I was bringin' home to maw." He glanced at the old lady and smiled. "That's why you never got any candy this trip, Maw," he explained apologetically. "I gave the whole bag to the boy. It was worth it, too — way he began to put 'em away, two at a time. Mebbe he run off and hid

from that lickin','' he added hopefully, picking up a rifle.

"The team come home," Johnson pointed out impatiently, "and the hull country for ten mile around has been combed. He never got off afoot.'' But he said it mildly and stared uneasily at the way Lark was handling the rifle; not pointing it at any one, but holding it so that any man there could look down its muzzle if he but turned his wrist a bit.

"Set up to the table, folks," Maw invited briskly. "Larkie, can't you leave them smelly old guns long enough to eat?" Then she sighed, almost as an afterthought. "My, my, it's terrible to think of a child like that."

"Might as well finish this job, Maw. Hands all stunk up, now. You folks go ahead. Well, a kid like that can only be crowded just so far," he returned to the subject. "I know he was scared of somebody that would give him a lickin', and I know what a horse will do when it gets the notion it ain't being treated right. It'll quit the range, give it a chance. That boy was a mile from his lickin', just about, and he wasn't more than twenty rods from the hills. I expect a pound of gumdrops would look to him like supplies enough to carry him a hundred miles. Betcha a

broke horse the kid beat it. And if he did I hope he makes it outa the country."

White and Johnson ate uncomfortably, more than half their attention given to the nonchalant handling of the guns across the room. Just behind Lark's chair was a closed door, and from behind that closed door came the sound of footsteps; rather, the creaking of boards beneath the weight of some person.

"Old man Palmer," Lark stated emphatically, "is the kinda man that would skin a louse for its hide and tallow. He'd likely keep every man in the country riding the hills and neglecting his work, huntin' down a little shaver of a boy that he can drive to a man's work and save, mebby, two dollars a day. Betcha a beef critter he won't say thank-yuh or go-ta-hell for the ridin'. No, sir, I don't feel called upon to put any Meddalark horses under the saddle for that kinda slave-chasin'. If the kid had the spunk to drift outa there, he's got my good wishes. And you can go tell him I said so."

"Ain't it struck yuh that might look kinda bad?" Johnson was stirring his coffee with his left hand, his right hand under the edge of the table.

"Think it does?" Lark very casually laid

down the rifle — with his left hand — and picked up the six-shooter with his right. He seemed to be studying the W L filed on the metal behind the trigger, and while he was looking at that the muzzle pointed at the wall two feet behind Johnson.

"My Jonah, this gun of dad's is all specked with tarnish!" Lark exclaimed, interrupting himself. "Four of the notches is plumb rusty, which they wouldn't be if my old dad was alive to-day. My Lord, how he could shoot! I've seen him wing a horsefly at forty yards and never ruffle the hair on the horse. Fact. Makes me think of what he used to say about how things *look*. He always told me to let my conscience and cartridges guide me, and tahell with the *looks*. Dad would likely ride over and beef the man that made that little kid stand and cry because he couldn't lift a heavy drag off a rock for fear a tooth might be broke and he'd get a beatin'. What I'd ought to of done is ride on up to the house and call old man Palmer out and shoot him. What do you think, Johnson?"

Johnson's hand came up and rested ostentatiously on the table. He shuffled his feet and nodded, his eyes on his plate. White cleared his throat and glanced sidewise toward the door that

would let him out of the house by the shortest route.

"Have some goozeberry pie," Maw urged, and sucked her new teeth into place with a click of her tongue. "I hope they never catch that poor little feller. If they do, and I ever hear of old Palmer whippin' him again, I'll walk right over there with a black-snake and give him a good horsewhipping. I'll teach him!"

"I'll hold him for you, Maw." Bud Larkin reached out and patted her approvingly on the shoulder.

"Buddy, you go in and ask Mr. Smith if he could drink a cup of tea. You was vaccinated whilst you were off to school —"

"Somebody sick?" Johnson looked up, poising a knife loaded with mashed potatoes. "You ain't got smallpox here, have you?"

"No!" Lark spoke sharply. "Been a long time since I've saw a case, and I don't hardly believe this is smallpox. Sores break out on the forehead first, as I've heard it. These are on the back — back and shoulders, mostly. You take a close look, Bud, when you go in, and see if there's anything showin' on his face. And, my Jonah, be careful you don't pull down that sheet!"

Bud took the cup of tea that Maw had ready

and walked to the door behind Lark. He opened it, letting out a whiff of carbolic acid from the soaked sheet hung straight across the doorway.

"Feller rode in here to-day in pretty bad shape," Lark observed soberly. "Couldn't turn him out, couldn't put him in the bunk house with the boys, couldn't do a darn thing but fix him up comfortable where we could watch him. But I don't hardly think it's smallpox. All the cases I ever seen, the sores —"

Johnson pushed back his chair with a loud scraping sound on the white boards of the floor. White duplicated the sound and the haste.

"I guess we better be goin'," said Mr. Johnson, stooping to retrieve his hat from the floor. "I — you folks better not ride over with us, seein' as you've got sickness. Might spread somethin' — with everybody millin' around."

"That's good sense," chirped Maw. "Lark don't think it's anything ketchin', but that poor feller caught it, didn't he? He don't make no bones of it. No use exposin' the whole country — and you may be mighty sure, Mr. Johnson, that we ain't going to take any chances."

"You let Bud Larkin set right at the table with us, and you been passin' us dishes — that's chances enough for *me*." Mr. Johnson, herding

Mr. White before him, went out and slammed the door.

Maw stood with her head tilted grotesquely to one side, listening. A closed door, in her experience, did not always mean departure.

"Lark," she cried shrewishly, "what made you go and belittle that poor man's sickness to them fellers? They mighta stayed around here an' got exposed, an' you know as well as I do what ails that poor feller we took in. If they catch something, they needn't blame *me,* for I washed my hands good before I set the table. You'd oughta told them when they first come in—"

A board squeaked on the porch. Maw smiled, turned back to the stove and picked up the coffeepot; hesitated, put up a furtive hand and pulled out the new teeth which she slid into her apron pocket.

"Come on and eat your supper, Lark, before it's stone cold," she said in a relaxed tone. "I guess the gun cleanin' can wait; they're gone."

Lark slid some more cartridges into the cylinder of the notched gun, slipped it inside his waistband and rose.

"You got a case of smallpox on the ranch now; what you goin' to do with it, Maw?" he demanded

querulously. "A gun fight I can handle; I was raised on 'em. But how do you expect me to live up to smallpox? Answer me that!" Then he observed a certain vacancy in Maw's smile and frowned. "Where's your teeth? Swaller 'em?"

"No, I didn't!" Maw's leathery face showed a tinge of red. "You know as well as I do that I can't eat with them fillin' up my mouth. And as fer smallpox, how else you expect to keep folks from snoopin' around, lookin' fer that boy? Them men suspicioned you, Larkie, you know it as well as I do. It's a mercy I wrung out that sheet and hung it up — they heared the boy movin' around in there. Mebby you didn't see 'em wallin' their eyes that way, but I did. Lucky I could give 'em something for their pains of stretching their ears — you'd likely have two dead men on your hands to explain."

"Feller knows where he's at when it's straight shootin'," Lark contended in a tone of complaining. "This thing of lyin' out of a scrape —"

"I didn't lie, and neither did you. But I expect we'll all of us do some tall old falsifying before we're through. They ain't goin' to let the matter rest where it's at, Lark. You'd ought of thought about these things — Lark, do you s'pose

them fellers will stop and quiz Jake about our Mr. Smith? "

"My Jonah!" Lark ejaculated under his breath, and went out bareheaded to see for himself.

He found Jake leaning against the shed wall with his hands in his pants pockets and his mouth wide open, laughing with a silent quaking of his whole body. He stopped when Lark walked up to him and pointed to where two horsemen were making one blurred shadow on the trail down past the meadow.

" Smoky Ford's goin' t' have a hell of a time supplyin' the demand fer carbolic acid and such," Jake declared maliciously. " And there goes two men that'll bile their shirts, I betcha." He gave Lark a facetious poke in the ribs. " Dunno what the idee is, but I rode right in your dust. They come down past the bunk house and wanted to know what we done with the outfit of the feller that rode in here with smallpox, and was he broke out bad. I played 'er strong, y' betcha. Told 'em I'd burnt saddle, bridle, blanket an' all the clothes the feller was wearin' at the time, an' shot an' cremated the hoss — by his consent durin' a loocid minute. An' as fer bein' broke out, I tells 'em you couldn't put a burnt match

down anywhere on his face without bustin' a sore. Told 'em it was the worst case I ever seen. I kinda had t' play 'er with m' eyes shet, Lark, but if you'd saw fit t' have a man here that was down with smallpox, I knowed damn' well he'd oughta have it mighty bad an' be right down sick with it. Hunh?"

"You shore made 'im sick, all right," Lark grunted, and went off to the house without another word.

CHAPTER THREE

LARK DOES A LITTLE BRANDING

LARK stacked his cup and saucer in his breakfast plate, added knife, fork and spoon as range custom had taught him to do, and reached absently for his tobacco sack and papers. Maw was going to spoil the kid, he thought. Already she was mystifying him with a fascinating game of "Two-little-birds-set-on-a-hill," with bits of the inner lining of an eggshell pasted on her forefingers to represent the two little birds, and sending the kid into hilarious squeals when Jack and Jill flew away and returned again with incomprehensible facility.

"Maw," said Lark, as he drew a match sharply along the underside of his chair, "looks like that smallpox is about cured, right now. I'm goin' to Smoky Ford, and I might be late gettin' back. Anybody you don't like the looks of rides into the Basin, why, there's the shotgun loaded with buckshot. She kicks, so hold her tight to your shoulder and pull one trigger at a time. You'll find extra shells in my room, in the cupboard be-

hind the door. Don't stand fer no monkey work, Maw. The boys ain't likely to get in with that bunch of cattle before to-morra, so it'll be you and Jake to hold the fort; and Bud —" His eyes went to the glum face of his handsome young nephew.

"I'll ride with you, if you're damn' fool enough to go hunting trouble," Bud stated calmly, pushing back his chair.

"If Bat Johnson comes here again, I'll shoot him," said the boy abruptly, ignoring Maw's little white birds while he stared across at Lark. "He's a mean devil. Meaner 'n gran'pa. He — he goes an' tells gran'pa everything. He's a mean old tattle-tale."

"Now, Lark," Maw began worriedly, "there ain't a mite of use in you going to town. Them men was scared off last night. You couldn't hire 'em to come here and run the risk —"

"That's where you're fooled, Maw. They'll be back, don't you fret — leave 'em alone. My old dad brought me up to meet trouble halfway down the trail and shootin' as I ride. It's a good way — only way I know anything about. The Meddalark's never learnt how to lie and dodge, Maw, and now's a pore time to begin, looks like to me. Last night don't set well with me; when you come

to think it over, I'm the feller that's got to live with me the closest and the longest, Maw. I'd hate to have to live with a feller all my life that I was ashamed of." He smiled suddenly with a boyish grin. "You see, Maw, I kinda put a spoke in the wheel of destiny, and she's liable to bust something if she ain't watched till she hits her stride again.

"Son, yore fightin' days are yet to come. How about some more gumdrops? You be a good boy to-day, and mind what Maw tells you, and mebbe there'll be a bag of candy in my pocket when I git back. You betcha."

Maw rose and stood goblinlike behind the boy's chair, her face turned grayish under the tan.

"Larkie, I know that town better than you do. There's a mean, low-lived bunch hanging around that I wouldn't put nothing past. If you must go, wait till the boys come with the cattle so you can have help. Six of you won't be any too many to face Palmer's bunch, and what saloon loafers he can drum up in town. Lark, I *know*. I was there when that trouble with the Willis boys come up, and I know just what that mob is capable of when they've got somebody to stir 'em up. You wait, Larkie. Don't go and do anything foolish, like riding to Smoky Ford to-day, right when—"

Her voice broke and she turned her back on them, wiping her eyes surreptitiously on her apron.

"I like the way you count me," Bud cried with thin cheerfulness. "Never mind, Maw. I can rope and throw Lark any time he gets to horning in where he shouldn't, and I promise you that he isn't going to pull open any hornet's nest just to see how it's made. And Lark's right about one thing, anyway. The best thing to do, now it's pretty well known where we stand, is to ride in and show we aren't ashamed of ourselves. The Willis boys were afraid, Maw. They tried to run, and then when they were caught, they begged like whipped pups. And moreover, they were guilty as hell. Buck up, Maw." He went over and patted her on the shoulder. "Lark isn't going to do anything you'd be ashamed of."

"If you see gran'pa," said the boy fiercely, "you tell — tell him I'm goin' t' stay with — with you. Tell him I — I'm goin' t' kill him when I get big."

Lark looked down at him thoughtfully, smiled a bit at Maw's shocked expostulations, and turned to the door.

"I'll sure tell him that, son," he promised gravely. "And don't you worry a minute about me, Maw."

Maw did worry, however. She would have worried more if she could have seen and heard what was going on in Smoky Ford that morning. Old Palmer — who must have been old in sin, since he was not more than forty-five — had ridden in early with Johnson, White and two others of similar type. He did not go to the sheriff, as a man would have done whose cause was unassailable, but had talked in the saloons, his listeners for the most part those men who had joined in the search for the lost boy.

"Smallpox, my eye!" Palmer cried thickly. "There ain't a case in the country. It was my son's boy that they had hid away in that room — and us all huntin' the hills for him! It's like the Meddalark — an outlaw bunch if ever there was one. Look at old man Larkin! If ever a man deserved stringin' up, he did. And Lark and that kid nephew ain't any better. Stealin' calves from me right along — and now they take the boy and hide him away in a room —" There was a great deal of the same kind of talk, for Palmer was not the man to let anything slip away from him.

Smoky Ford men should have stopped to wonder why Palmer the tight-fisted was buying whisky for every man that joined the listening group around him. It never had happened before

that any one could remember, nor was it likely to happen again. But men do not as a rule stop to ask why, when the bartender is busy and makes no sign that he expects pay for every filled glass. Palmer's money was good that morning; he had a grievance and the men who had turned out to search for a lost child discovered that Palmer was a human kinda cuss, after all, and that it looked as if a crime had been committed boldly, in broad daylight. Then Bat Johnson artfully crystallized the growing sentiment born of whisky and Palmer's loud-mouthed denunciations.

"Hell, if it was a horse that was stole, that p'ticular Meddalark bunch would be busted up in short order. Being a kid that's made 'way with—" he stopped there to empty his glass "—why, mebby we oughta let 'em get away with it. Some places, though, folks count humans worth as much as horses, anyway."

"Damn' right," a Palmer man muttered. "I'm goin' t' ride up river, t'night, and ask how about it. Bat an' me figures we c'n clean out that nest by our lonely, an' git the kid back. Rest of you folks better pull the blankets over your heads t'night er you might hear shootin'."

"Rope beats that," suggested another, his tongue thickened by what had been poured over it.

Two or three grunted approval — a bit uncertainly, because in normal times they liked the Meadowlark outfit, Lark himself in particular, and they did *not* like Palmer.

"Better send the sheriff after the kid," one level-headed cowpuncher advised. "Lark just done it fer a josh, most likely."

"Yeah, better send the sheriff up there," some one agreed.

"Sheriff ain't here," said Palmer shortly. The crowd was colder on the scent than he liked. Had he known it, there had been hints among the searchers that the boy was better off in the hills than with his grandfather, and that he had probably run away. Which proves that they were human enough in their mental reactions if left alone.

He presently left that saloon and wandered into another, and there were plenty of half-drunken men by that time who would follow him for the free drinks that were in it. By noon the crowd was convinced that stealing a child is as serious a crime as stealing a horse and that the punishment should be as swift and sure. And it is a fact that when men dealt with the crime of horse-stealing they did not stop to inquire whether the owner had been kind to the beast. A horse was

a horse, and stealing was stealing. So the Meadowlark outfit was declared outlaw, and at least fifty men prepared to stage a lynching that night in Meadowlark Basin.

They were making the last sinister plans and electing a captain of the mob — Palmer, of course — when Lark rode into town and down the road that was called a street, Bud's right stirrup swinging close to his left one. A man crossing the street to a saloon gave them a startled glance and dived inside bearing all the earmarks of one who is about to spill a mouthful of amazing news.

"Right there's the bee tree," Lark observed under his breath, and rode after him. The half door was still swinging when Lark's horse pushed in with a snort of distaste for the job, and Lark himself ducked his tall hat crown under the casing.

"Howdy, folks," he cried cheerful greeting. "Come on down to the Chester House, will you? I've got something to tell you — and I want Palmer there, particular. Fetch him along — I see he's here. Missed him at the ranch." He began backing out again. "If you please," he added carefully, as a polite afterthought.

Outside, he headed for the next saloon, looked

in and found no one there but the bartender. Him he beckoned with a crooked finger, and rode on to the next, with Bud beside him and the mob hurrying curiously at his heels. Lark's restless eyes darted to Bud's right hand that fumbled the butt of his six-shooter thrust within his belt, and he grinned and shook his head.

"Don't think you'll need it, m' son," he said softly, as they reached the little hotel with the high platform in front, and he swung his horse to meet the crowd. There was no smile now on his lips, and his eyes were steady except for the light that flickered deep within.

"All right, folks. Just put Palmer up in front here, will you? I've got a message for him that I promised to deliver."

"Ransom, eh?" Palmer's teeth showed under his lifted lip. "You're crazy to come here and stick your neck in the noose—"

"You shut up, will you?" Lark's voice was so quiet that men in the rear crowded forward to hear what he was saying. "I'll do the talking for a minute. No, the boy you been hunting sent you a message. He said to tell you that he was going to stay with me, and that when he's big enough, he's going to kill you." Lark paused. "I think he'll do it, Palmer. There's good stuff

in that kid and he won't forget." He lifted his eyes to the crowd behind Palmer.

"Folks, that little kid has got welts all over him, just about, where Palmer quirted him. He's between eight and nine years old, just the age when a boy plays the hardest and grows the fastest — and when I seen him he was out in the field following a heavy drag around (or trying to) and the team he had to handle was the kind you need a pitchfork to go in the stall with 'em. The black lammed out with his heels while I was there talkin' to the kid, and the gray was wallin' his eyes and watchin' for a chance. Palmer loves that boy, don't you think? He ought to have him back. Must save him a dollar a day, and don't cost as much to feed a kid as it does a man; not that kid, anyway. You can count his ribs as far as you can see him, when his shirt's off. Starved him, Palmer did. And beat him till —" Lark stopped and swallowed and blinked, and the crowd moved uneasily and sent sidelong glances at one another.

"So the kid will carry some of them marks till he grows up, and he ain't likely to forget. He'll kill Palmer as sure as God made little apples, if Palmer ain't killed already by the time the kid's growed up t' be a man. Palmer's got that

to look forward to. But that's the kid's game, and I wouldn't for the world get in and spoil it for him. I hope Palmer lives with that in mind — that the kid he beat raw is growin' fast as he can and lookin' forward to the time when he can kill the devil that used him so.

"But, as I say, that's the kid's game. What I come after Palmer for is to put the Meddalark brand on him with my quirt. I never did try to draw that bird on a man's hide, but I'll never start younger, and I feel like I'm artist enough to mark this damn' long-ear, till the kid can get around to beef him. I been lookin' at the marks on the kid's back, so I've got them to go by. Palmer, don't make me kill you! I'd hate to cheat the kid like that."

Lark, easing himself to one side in the saddle, ready to dismount swiftly, halted Palmer's incipient flight as if he had caught him by the collar.

"All right, Lark. I've got him covered," snapped Bud, just behind him. "Go to it." He spurred forward. "Give me your bridle reins," he added matter-of-factly.

On the ground, quirt in hand, Lark advanced upon Palmer, who tried to shrink into the crowd and was shoved back into the open space as unhesitatingly as if these men had not been drink-

ing his whisky and absorbing his viewpoint since morning. Palmer staggered under the impetus of the shove, and Lark caught him expertly by the collar, yanked his coat off, grabbed again and went to work, punctuating the swish and thud of the quirt by words that bit into the soul of the man like acid.

"Drop that gun!" This was Bud, cutting short Bat Johnson's half-formed determination to do murder. "This is no shooting match — unless some fool like you makes it so." Upon the close-packed, staring crowd Bud was calmly riding herd, Lark's horse dancing at the end of his reins and lashing out at any man who pressed forward. Strange as it might have seemed to those who had watched the slow forming of the mob idea, the strongest sentiment in that crowd was irritation against Bud, who blocked their view of the show. Men darted to the hotel platform and scrambled up to a vantage point, eager to miss no vicious cut of that flailing quirt.

Palmer, on his knees, begged for mercy. It was pitiable, nauseating, to hear how he wept and pleaded under the blows.

"Did you quit beating the kid when he cried?" Lark's voice was merciless, his eyes aglare with rage.

"He'll kill you for that," a man told Lark soberly when it was all over, and Palmer had slunk away with his shoulders bent and bloody, mouthing curses and threats. "You'll need a bullet-proof back from now on. Come have a drink."

"No — thank you just the same." Lark lifted a hand, stared dully at the way it was trembling, and wiped the beads of perspiration off his face. "I — the kid is waiting for some candy I promised him." He reached out a groping hand for the reins Bud was offering, and mounted like a man who is very, very tired. "I — guess we'd better be goin'. Maw'll be worried."

"And so," Bud remarked thoughtfully, when they had ridden a mile down the trail toward the Meadowlark, thirty-five miles away, "you've stopped a lynching party, marked the back of the richest and meanest man in the country for life, staked yourself to a feud that will keep you guessing from now on, and annexed another responsibility in the form of a boy you'll feel you've got to educate same as you did me. Lark, you damned fool, you're the kind of man King Arthur would have been proud of."

"Hunh?" Larked glanced up from tightening the scanty string on the lumpy bag of candy that

was too big to go in his pocket and so must be carried for thirty-five miles in his hand. "Talk United States, darn you; I ain't ridin' the range fer no king!"

CHAPTER FOUR

BUD

Dust lay deep in the trail and spurted up in little clouds from under the tired feet of Bud Larkin's sweat-streaked sorrel. Smoky Ford squatted as always with her board shacks huddled about her one street and the rear windows staring stupidly at the hills beyond the swift-flowing river hidden behind the willows and the steep bank. The afternoon was half gone and the mid-July wind was hot and dry, and Bud had been in the saddle since early morning. He rode up to the hitch-rail in front of the Elkhorn saloon and dismounted, wondering a little at the crowd uproariously filling the place. Moving a bit stiffly, he went inside, the big rowels of his spurs making a pleasant *br-br-brr* on the boards, the chains clinking faintly under the arch of his high-heeled boots as he walked.

The whole of his high gray hat, the brim turned back and skewered to the crown with a cameo pin filched from the neck of a pretty girl whom he had kissed on the mouth for her laughing resist-

ance, looked as if it were afloat on a troubled sea of felt as he pushed through the noisy crowd and up to the bar, his thoughts all of beer cold and foaming in the glass. The cameo pin and the pretty girl were forgotten, the smoldering eyes under his straight brown brows held no vision of gentle dalliance, though Bud was a good-looking young devil of twenty-two who gave blithe greeting to Romance when he met her on the lonely trails. His mouth, given easily to smiles that troubled the dreams of many a range girl, was grim now and dusty in the corners as he waited thirstily for the tall glass mug ribbed on the outside and spilling foam over the top; took one long swallow when the busy bartender pushed the glass toward him, and turned, elbowing his way to an empty table against the wall where he could sit down and rest himself and take his time over the refreshment.

Negligent greeting he gave to one or two whose eyes he met, but for the most of them he had no thought. It was not his kind of a crowd, being composed largely of the town drifters and a few from the neighboring ranches. The cause of their foregathering was not far to seek. Steve Godfrey was present and deeply engaged in letting his world know that he was having one of his

sprees — during which he was wont to proclaim loudly that he was prying off the lid, taking the town apart, painting her red; whatever trite phrase came first to his loose lips. On such occasions he lacked neither friends nor an audience.

"*Ev*-rybody dance!" Steve was shouting drunkenly, his face turned toward the doorway where a man was entering whose back bore certain scars, they said, which Lark could best explain; Palmer, whose silent enmity was felt by the Meadowlark even though he had as yet made no open move against them. "Lock the door! 'S my saloon — bought 'er for the next two hours! Drink 'er dry, boys, and *ev*-rybody dance!"

Palmer laughed sourly and shut the inner door with a bang, pushing the bolt across. There was a general stampede for the bar, behind which Steve Godfrey was pulling down bottles with both hands and laughing wide-mouthed as they were snatched from him. Bud's lip curled.

A young fellow at the next table was sketching rapidly in a notebook, glancing up after each pencil stroke to catch fresh glimpses of some face in the crowd. Bud lifted his beer, took a sip and set down the mug, watching sidelong the careless, swift work of his neighbor. A stranger in the town, Bud tagged him. A tenderfoot, judging by

the newness of his riding clothes, the softness of his hands, the town pallor of his face. He looked up and smiled faintly with that wistfulness of the lonely soul begging silently for friendship, and Bud's scornful young mouth relaxed into a grin.

"Great stuff — all new to me, though," the young man confided, nodding toward the massed backs before him.

"Crazy bunch of booze-fighters," Bud condemned the crowd tersely.

"Say, whyn't you up here drinkin' with the rest?" Steve Godfrey, standing on a keg behind the bar, bawled angrily at the artist. "You, I mean, over there by the wall. What's the matter with you? Sick at the stummick?"

"Why, no. Thank you just the same, but I don't drink liquor."

"Don't, ay?" Steve scowled and spat into a corner. "Well, if you don't drink, dammit, you'll dance!"

Bud moved his slim body sidewise so that his gun hung handily within reach of his fingers. The young man shrugged his shoulders, closed his notebook and put it away with the pencil. The crowd had swung round and was staring and waiting to see what would happen next.

"I don't mind dancing for you," smiled the artist, "but I can't dance without music, you know."

"Can't, ay?" Steve was happy now, bullying some one who would not fight back. "Say! you git up and dance to *this!*"

The stranger looked at the gun in Steve's hand, glanced into Steve's eyes and stifled a yawn.

"You know very well that's impossible," he said patiently. "I've always said that this dancing to the music of a six-shooter is a fake, invented by some Eastern author for melodramatic effect. I still believe you got the idea out of some book. I wouldn't mind dancing for you, but you couldn't possibly beat time with that gun. Six shots, and I'd have to stop and wait while you reloaded. The thing isn't practical. If any one here could furnish some real music—"

"I have a mouth-harp, though you may not call that real music," Bud announced unexpectedly, and finished his beer with one long swallow. It amused young Bud to see the stupid indecision on the face of Steve Godfrey, who lacked the wit to handle an old range joke when it chanced to take a new turn.

"Good!" The young man smiled frankly. "Clear a space over there by the door, will

you?" He looked inquiringly at Bud. "What can you play?"

"I can play anything you can dance," Bud grinned reply, well pleased with the small diversion. "How about a good old buck-and-wing?"

"All right, buck-and-wing it is." The stranger nodded, cast another glance toward that nonplused bully, Steve Godfrey, who stood on the keg with the gun sagging in his hand and his mouth half open, and took his place in the center of the makeshift stage.

Bud shot him a puzzled glance not unmixed with a certain tolerant contempt. The young fellow's manner gave no hint of fear, so why should he dance at the bidding of a drunken bully? Bud did not like to think that the tenderfoot had seized the first excuse for showing off before so sorry an audience.

However, the motive was no business of Bud's. He polished the harmonica on his sleeve, moistened his boyish lips that turned so easily to smiles, cupped his hands around the little instrument so dear to the heart of a cowboy and swung into a jig tune. Sitting on the edge of the table with his head tilted to one side, eyes half closed and watching the dancer while a well-made riding boot tapped the beat of the measures on the rough

board floor, Bud never knew the picture he made.

The dancer's eyes studied the lines of his clean young face and throat, the tilt of his hat with the cameo brooch pinning back the broad brim, the slim, muscular body and straight legs; studied and recorded each curve and line in a photographic memory. And he could dance the while! Smoky Ford had never seen anything like it. Hornpipe and highland fling he did, never taking his eyes off Bud, but mechanically fitting the steps to each tune as it was played. Even the free whisky was forgotten as the crowd pressed close to watch him.

Then Bud awoke to the fact that his lips were getting sore from rubbing across the reeds, that time was passing and that he had urgent business in another part of town. Fifteen minutes or more had been spent when he had thought to drink a glass of beer and go on. He put away his mouth-harp and started for the door.

"Hey! Come back here with that music!" Steve Godfrey shouted arrogantly. "Where the hell you goin'?"

"Where did you get the crazy notion you could give orders to *me?*" Bud flung contemptuously over his shoulder as he slid back the bolt.

"You stay where you're at! That door stays shut till I give the word to open it!" Steve was off the keg and plowing toward him through the crowd.

"You'll stay shut a heap longer," flared Bud, and gave Steve an uppercut that sent his teeth into his tongue and jarred him cruelly. Behind Steve a lean face leered at Bud; the face of Palmer, who was edging forward as if he meant to take a hand. The key had been turned in the lock and removed — by Palmer, Bud would have sworn. The knowing look in his eyes betrayed that much.

Steve was coming at him again, gun in hand and mouthing threats; but the stranger who had danced managed to hook an agile foot between his legs and throw Steve so hard that he bounced. Then he swung a chair, and the crowd backed.

Bud opened the door by the simple expedient of shooting the lock off it, and went out with belled nostrils like a bull buffalo on the rampage. The strange youth followed close behind, the chair still held aloft and ready for a charge.

"Come on, Lightfoot," Bud snorted. "That bunch fights mostly with their mouths." A little farther down the street his temper cooled to the point where further speech came easily.

"Darned chumps! I guess I quit rather suddenly, but it wasn't because I was tired of watching you dance. You're a dandy. But I have to get into the bank, and it's about closing-up time. I just happened to think of it."

"I'd danced quite long enough. I wanted to leave and meant to the first chance," the stranger dubbed Lightfoot confessed. "I guess they're a pretty tough lot in there; but I want to get acquainted, and I knew they'd probably enjoy my dancing and feel more friendly toward me. I'm anxious to shake down into the community and be considered just one of you."

"Are you classing me with that bunch back there?" Bud gave him a studying look.

"No-o—I meant the whole country, when I spoke. I'm a stranger here, and it seems pretty hard to get acquainted." He shook his head ruefully. "Now, I'm afraid I've only made matters worse, fighting like that."

"That wasn't a fight. They've gone back to lapping up free booze by now, and don't remember anything about it. Dirty sneaks, most of them are, and the less you shake down and be considered just one of them the better."

He went up the steps of the little, private bank at the end of the street, rattled the door knob,

frowned at the green-shaded windows and looked at his watch.

"Three minutes to three, and I'm two minutes fast," he commented. "They've no business locking up ahead of time. I've just got to get in, that's all there is about it."

"There's a side door," the stranger suggested, and Bud gave a nod of assent and led the way around the corner of the building. A man with a packhorse was riding out from the open lot behind the bank, going toward the river at a shacking trot. Bud gave him a casual glance, turned to the bank door and discovered that it was locked also, an unusual circumstance at that hour. He gave the door a kick or two by way of protest.

"This is one hell of a town!" he snorted. "Let's take a look at the back windows. The cashier surely must be inside, and I'll raise him — if I have to take the darn bank apart."

"I'm afraid I'm partly to blame," apologized the stranger. "I didn't know you were in a hurry."

"I quit in time. The bank doesn't close until three, and a fellow can always get in the side door any time within an hour after that. It's got no business to be locked up like a jail this time of day." They were inspecting the windows in the

rear and saw that they were all closed in spite of the July heat. "Lightfoot, don't ever tell me you're living here because you like the place, or I'm liable to think you're crazy."

"Lightfoot" grinned.

"I'm here because my sister and I liked the name on the map. It seemed to be located right in the heart of the cattle country, where dramatic incident and local color should be at their best. Our name isn't Lightfoot, though. I don't understand how you got the idea it was. My name is Brunelle. I'm Lawrence Brunelle and my sister's name is Margaret; Marge and Lawrie we're always called. We've been here only a week."

"That's a week longer than I'd want to stay," Bud declared. "You picked about the meanest place in Montana when you chose Smoky Ford. I wish to thunder I knew where that cashier went. He doesn't drink, so it's of no use looking in the saloons. Say, if I stand on the door knob and get a squint over the curtain, could you hold my legs and steady me? The darn knob might bust." He stooped to unbuckle his spurs. "I tell you, Lightfoot, there's something wrong about this bank being closed up tight as a drum a good hour sooner than it should be."

With the ease of any other young broncho

fighter he mounted the door knob, balanced there on the ball of one foot and bent to peer in through the three-inch space above the green shade that had been pulled down over the glass panel in the door. An awkward position, but he did not keep it long. When he dropped and faced Brunelle his eyes were wide and black with excitement.

"He's dead in there, Lightfoot! The whole top of his head is caved in, and the vault door's wide open!"

Spurs and crumpled gloves in one hand, Bud led the way across the street and down several doors to where James Delkin, the bank's president, ran a livery stable — he being a banker in name only, as is the way of village banks that cater to the local trade and find few customers, though these may carry rather large accounts. Delkin was swearing at his hostler when the two arrived, but he gave over that pastime long enough to hear the news. His face went tallow white.

"I told you first, Mr. Delkin. The rest of the town is boozing in the Elkhorn, and no one knows what has happened. I hate to push my private business into this, but it's a long ride to the Meadowlark, and Lark sent in a check to be cashed. Fifteen hundred dollars, it is. Will this murder make any difference?"

"*Difference?*" Delkin slowed his tottering run to stare at Bud. "If the vault's cleaned out, you can't get fifteen cents! My God, man, the bank will be broke!"

"Oh, say!" Brunelle's voice held panic. "My sister and I brought all our money with us and banked it here, just last week!"

Delkin was nervously trying to fit a key into the lock of the side door, and he did not seem to hear. They pushed in together, Bud thoughtfully closing the door behind them with the idea of staving off the excitement that would follow hard on the heels of the town's enlightenment.

Delkin lunged through the partition door, rushed to the open vault, gave one look and turned to the grewsome figure lying asprawl on the floor. He looked at the shelf behind the cashier's window, at the pulled-out, empty drawer beneath and slumped into a chair, his whole form seeming to have shrunk and aged perceptibly.

"Charlie dead," he wailed, "and the bank cleaned out — ruined! My God, what can I do?"

"Do?" Bud's eyes snapped. "Get after the gang that did it! You can get the money back if you pull yourself together. They can't eat it, and — the way Charlie looks, I'd say this happened not more than half an hour ago." He

turned to Brunelle, the cameo brooch looking oddly out of place above his hard eyes and grim mouth. "You raise the town, Lightfoot, and I'll fork my horse and get after that pack outfit we saw leaving here as we came around the corner."

"You think he did this?" Brunelle looked startled. "One man couldn't, could he?"

"One man could have seen the gang leave here," Bud retorted impatiently. "Delkin, you stay here. Lightfoot will send some one." He whirled and was gone, running lightly down to where his horse was tied in front of the Elkhorn saloon, from which still rolled the uproar of boisterous celebration of nothing.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SIGN OF THE GOLDEN ARROW

STILL, clear moonlight lay upon the land, with the far hills like a painted back drop against the stars when Bud, having ridden far and fast, jogged wearily into town and dropped reins before the bank, where a light shone faintly through the curtained windows and figures were to be seen moving occasionally behind the green shades. He knocked, and after a hushed minute Delkin himself admitted him. Bud walked from force of habit to the grilled window and leaned his forearms heavily upon the shelf, his cameo-pinned hat pushed back on his head as he pressed his forehead against the bronze rods of the barrier.

"Well, I rode the high lines," he announced huskily because of the dryness in his throat. "I saw the bunch from town go fogging along the trail across the river, but I was back on the bench, following a mess of horse tracks that took off toward the hills.

"There's something darn funny about this deal, Mr. Delkin." Delkin had retreated again behind the partition as if that was what his office

required of him. "Here's how she lies, but I don't pretend to understand it. I got my horse and rode back up here and out behind the bank, so as to pick up any trail they had left. The only horses that had stood for any length of time near the bank was a pack outfit that had been on the vacant lot back here all afternoon, by the sign. It was Bat Johnson had it — he works for Palmer. He rode away just as I came around the corner of the bank, thinking I could get in at the side door, and I overhauled him at the ford. He'd taken that stock trail through the willows, back here, and he told me he'd got a glimpse of three or four horses loping down through the draw to the ford ahead of him. He hadn't seen any one leave the bank by the side door, he said, for he was over to the blacksmith shop for a while and came and got his horses just as I came in sight around the corner. He hadn't seen any one that acted suspicious, but he hadn't been paying any attention, he said.

"I rode back up the draw and picked up the trail of four horses, shod all around. Your town posse crossed the river while I was in the draw, and I followed the four horses across. The riders ahead of me didn't pay any attention to the tracks. I suppose," he added scornfully, "they were look-

ing for masked men with white sacks full of money in their arms! They just loped down the road, all in a bunch, as if they were headed for a dance." Bud cleared his throat; this painstaking report was dry work.

"Well, Mr. Delkin, those four horses — shod all around — took straight across the bench beyond the Smoky, heading for the hills. Here's the funny part, though: They didn't hunt the draws where they could keep out of sight, but sifted right along in a beeline, across ridges and into hollows and out again, until the tracks were lost where they joined a bunch of range stock that's running back there on the bench about eight miles. From there on I couldn't get a line on anything at all. I tried to ride up on the bunch, but my horse was tired and they're pretty wild, and they broke for the hills. There were shod horses among them, and I'm sure that no one had time to catch up fresh horses out of that band and leave the four — and, Mr. Delkin, those four horses didn't travel as if they had riders. I'd swear they were running loose, and beat it straight from town to join their own bunch of range horses."

"And that's all you found out?" Delkin's voice was flat and old and hopeless.

"That's the extent of it. It was a blind trail, I believe, and your holdups went some other way. Perhaps that posse will pick up some sign, though if they do it will be an accident."

The other men there asked a few questions, their manner as hopeless as Delkin's. They were the directors and other officers of the bank, and Bud sensed their feeling of helplessness before this calamity. The body of the cashier had been removed, and these were staying on the scene simply because they did not know what else to do.

"How's the bank? Cleaned out?" Bud was still conscious of his own personal responsibilities.

"Everything." Delkin waved an apathetic hand. "We're so far from other banks, and Charlie slept right here — so in spite of the fact that we sometimes didn't have more than a dozen customers in here all day, we kept more cash on hand than was safe. At least we had more on hand right now than usual. With the bookkeeper sick, Charlie was alone here part of the time. Near closing time especially. So few people came in, along in the afternoon. We did most of our business during the forenoons." He moistened his lips and looked away. "It looks as if Charlie had just set the time lock and was getting ready to close the vault when — it happened. Another

half hour, perhaps, and they'd have had to blow open the vault, and some one would have heard. Maybe five minutes before you came — I can't see how they got away without being seen."

"Well, I can't do any more to-night, Mr. Delkin. My horse and I are both about all in. Of course you 'phoned for the sheriff."

"Right after it happened. He'll be here with a posse of his own before morning."

Outside Bud almost collided with young Brunelle, who caught him by the arm with an impulsive gesture.

"I recognized your horse. Come over to our cabin, won't you, Mr. Larkin? You see I've discovered what your name is. I've been watching for you to come back, for I knew you'd be hungry; and Marge — my sister Margaret — has supper all ready for you. We're pretty lonely," he added wistfully. "People here seem to be very clannish and cool toward strangers."

"That's because they're roughnecks and know it," said Bud, and picked up the reins of his horse. "If you'll wait until I put my horse in the stable I'll be right with you. Only I'm liable to clean you out of grub if I once start eating. There's over six feet of me, Lightfoot, and I'm all hollow."

"That'll be all right," smiled the other. "It's yours while it lasts — and that may not be long if the bank is really closed for good. We haven't any money to buy more."

Delkin's hostler took charge of the Meadowlark horse and the two men walked on to where a light shone through a cabin window, set back from the main street in an open space that gave a close view of the bluff. Bud very likely did not grasp the imminent poverty of his host, probably because he was not paying much attention to his last sentence; and that his ready acceptance of the invitation to supper was caused chiefly by a too intimate knowledge of the hotel cuisine.

"My sister," Brunelle explained on the way, "is an author of short stories. She has had one printed in the paper back home, and the editors of several Eastern magazines have given her quite a good many puffs on the stories she sent them. They were very sorry they couldn't use them and said it wasn't because there was anything wrong with the stories. I know all our friends at home are very anxious that she should make that her life work. But back in our home town there never seemed to be anything to write about, and Marge felt the need of going where there would be interesting subjects. So when mother died we de-

cided to come right out West and write up some cowboy stories, and I could illustrate them with pictures drawn from life. Western stories are all the go now, and these ought to take pretty well with the editors, I should think — though of course one needs to have a pull to get right in. Still, these will be done right on the spot with pictures of the real characters, and that will make a hit with the editors, I should think.

" So that's the real reason why we came to Smoky Ford. We aren't telling every one, because we don't want to make people self-conscious in our presence. We want to win the confidence of the people. That's why I danced in the saloon when they asked me to.

" We let it be known that my sister is out here for her health. That isn't so far off, either, because she was all worn out with taking care of mother, and the doctor advised her to go away somewhere for a while. So we sold the property — and every dollar we have we put in the bank here. We thought it would show our confidence in the town and help us get in with the right people."

" There aren't any right people to get in with; not to amount to anything," Bud told him bluntly. " Not in Smoky Ford. Delkin and — well, there

are four or five pretty nice men, but I don't know what kind of wives they've got. Gossipy old hens, most of them, I suppose. I'd drift to some other range, I believe, if I wanted to feel confidence in my neighbors."

Budlike, he wondered if the sister was pretty and young. Tired as he was, interest picked up his feet and pulled the sag out of his shoulders when they neared the open doorway and he caught a glimpse of the girl called Marge. He took off his hat and held it so that the cameo brooch was hidden within the palm of his left hand, and gave his rumpled brown hair a hasty rub with the other as he entered — silent, positive proof that the young woman had already caught his roving young masculine attention.

He ought to be hurrying on to the ranch that night. He told them so, and then permitted himself to be persuaded into staying all night and sharing the bed of his host, whom he persisted in calling Lightfoot in spite of one or two corrections.

"Oh, I know why you call Lawrie that," cried Marge, who had been studying closely this young cowboy, the very first one she had met on friendly footing. "It's a custom of cowboys to give names to strangers, just as the Indians do. You

know, Lawrie, Indians name their young and also strangers after the first thing that strikes their notice, the names for adults usually being suggested by some mark or trait in the individual that sets him apart from his fellows. Lawrie told me how he danced in the saloon while you played for him, and of course your custom demanded that you name him after his dancing. Don't you see, Lawrie? He has already given you your tribal, cowboy name — Lightfoot. I rather like it, I believe. So now you, at least, are initiated into the tribe — made a member of the tribe of cowboys!"

She had a pretty, eager way of speaking, and her eyes were the sparkly kind when she talked, yet Bud looked at her with a smoldering indignation in his eyes. Living next door to the Belknap reservation, he did not think much of Indians — less of their customs; he having known them long and too well. Nor did he approve of any one calling cowboys a tribe. He had barked knuckles on a man's cheek for less cause before now, and he set his teeth into his lower lip to hold in a retort discourteous. But Marge was a pretty girl, as has been plainly intimated; her gray eyes sparkled like stars on a frosty night, her skin was soft and whiter than any range girl could ever hope to at-

tain, and her mouth was red and provocative, daring male lips to kisses.

"Well, then, what are you going to call me?" she challenged fearlessly, as girls do who have been fed with flattery all their lives.

"I think perhaps I'll call you — Early," drawled Bud, a faint twitching at the corners of his mouth.

A range girl would have taken warning and let well enough alone after that. But Marge was not a range girl.

"But you aren't sure, so I can't accept that as final. And now, there's something I've been dying to ask you, Mr. Larkin. Just why do cowboys wear their sombreros pinned back like that? You know, I'm gathering local color of the cattle ranges, and I like to get right at the meaning of things." And with that, she pulled a notebook from her pocket and held pencil point to her lips. "Is it some special mark — an insignia of something? An insignia is a mark showing some certain rank," she explained kindly.

"Well, I guess it's an insignia, then," Bud confessed. "But it's a secret and I can't exactly explain. You won't see many wearing this particular badge — insignia." He rolled the word as if it were a new one and he liked the sound.

"Can't you even tell the name of the society or order?"

"Well—I can't go into details," said Bud gravely. "All I can say is it's the range sign of the golden arrow." (He thought she must surely see through that; she must certainly have read about that terrible young god, Cupid, who shot arrows of gold for love and arrows tipped with lead for hate. Surely she would remember that!)

But she didn't.

"The Golden Arrow? I don't—did you ever hear of that secret order, Lawrie?"

"No," said Lawrie indifferently, "not that I remember. But Mr. Larkin and I were going over to see if that posse has caught those bandits, Marge. If the bank doesn't get that money back, and has to close its doors, we're in a fix!"

"I know—but I want to find out about this secret society among the cowboys, Lawrie. It's important that I study cowboys when I get the chance, or how can I write about them realistically? And this Golden Arrow stuff is something *no* author of Western stories has ever mentioned. *Can't* you tell me a tiny bit more about it, Mr. Larkin?"

"Well, I know it's about the oldest society on

earth," Bud elucidated gravely. "I believe the very first savage —"

"Why, of course! How stupid of me not to see at once that the Golden Arrow must be pure Indian!"

"Well, I dunno how pure it is, but I guess —"

"And you're a member! But what I can't understand, Mr. Larkin, is why that cameo pin should be an emblem of the Golden Arrow."

"Why," said Bud, looking at her with soft, dark eyes that simply couldn't lie, "the cameo pin is recognized everywhere as the paleface sign."

"Of course!" cried Marge, and wrote it down in her book.

Bud went out, holding his lips carefully rigid and unsmiling, though he made strange gulping sounds in his throat all the way down town.

CHAPTER SIX

BUD DOES A LITTLE RUSTLING

The volunteer man hunters had returned much soberer though no wiser than they had set out, and with them came Bat Johnson, who declared that his trip could be postponed until after the inquest, which would be held as soon as the sheriff and coroner arrived from the county seat. In the meantime Delkin had sent frantic word by telephone to the nearest points, and men were riding into town on sweaty horses, curious to see the corpse of the cashier and eager to join in the chase.

"For half a cent I'd borrow a horse and take the trail alone, with grub enough for a couple of days," Bud confided restlessly to his companion. "I'd do it, only Delkin says we'll be wanted at the inquest to-morrow; and after that the sheriff will be on the job and running things to suit himself. Seems mighty queer, the way those bandits plumb disappeared and never left a trace. Bat Johnson claimed to me that he was sure four riders went down the draw and crossed the river

ahead of him, but now he admits that he only got a glimpse of the horses' rumps and can't swear to any riders. But what in thunder would range horses be doing right here in town almost? The whole thing's off color. I wish Lark was here — my uncle. He's pretty good at figuring out the other fellow's game."

"There must be some way to catch the murderers and get the money back," Brunelle worried. "Of course catching them won't help the cashier, but the money makes a big difference. This really does leave Marge and me in an awful fix, Mr. Larkin. All you people have homes and property, but here we are — perfect strangers; and a little over five dollars to face the world with! We didn't think it would be safe to keep any money in the house, out in this wild country, so every dollar we had was in the bank — where it would be safe!" He laughed a bit wildly. "Of course, I'll go to work at once. We both will. I wonder how much the robbers got?"

Bud shook his head.

"Delkin doesn't know, exactly; or if he does he isn't telling until he has to. He says Charlie Mulholland took care of everything while the other fellow has been sick, and all he or any of the others did was go in and act as teller while

Charlie wrote letters and worked on the books forenoons. It's just a little whiddledig of a bank — plenty of money, but not many depositors. All the cattlemen and some horse raisers used it, and put in great wads when they sold off some stock, and checked it out in driblets. I could have run the whole works myself, almost. If the bank's busted, the robbers got a plenty. It's going to hit a lot of us, but it sure is too bad you folks got caught. What kind of work did you think of doing?"

"Well, Marge could teach school, of course. And once she gets a stand-in with the editors, she can sell all the pieces she writes, and I can sell the pictures to go with them. I can get a job as a cowboy for a while, I suppose, until we get on our feet again." His jaw squared. "We'll never go back, that's one thing sure; not even if we had the train fare. All the neighbors said we'd make a fizzle of things if we left there. I suppose there's a school somewhere that Marge can teach, isn't there?"

"I don't know of — wel-l — come to think of it, the Meadowlark sure needs a school teacher." Bud had caught another disturbing sight of Marge sitting with bowed head by the table, lamplight shining through loose locks of hair.

Tired as he was, bedtime came too soon for Bud that night.

Marge would go to the inquest next morning, though Bud warned her that it would not be exciting and that she would only get herself talked about. These things could not daunt her. She must go, she said, because she was going to need murders and posses and sheriffs right along in her Western stories, and this was a wonderful opportunity to study the types at close range. She could not understand why Bud laughed.

So to the inquest she went, and thereby shocked the sober citizens of Smoky Ford, who liked their womenfolk shy and retiring. She mistook the big blacksmith for the sheriff, who was small and very quiet and kept his badge hidden under his vest. She was much disappointed in the coroner, who was pot-bellied and chewed tobacco frankly and untidily and spat where he pleased. Moreover, the corpse was in a back room out of sight, and Marge could not bring herself quite to the point of walking deliberately in to see how a man looks who has been murdered. She was the only woman present, and the room was crowded with men who stared at her; not even her notebook could furnish cause sufficient for her presence.

Then, after a few tedious preliminaries, they all trooped off to the bank to take a look around and left Marge all by herself in the empty storeroom. It did not help her temper any to have Bud ask her afterwards how she liked the wild, wild West as far as she had got.

"That man Palmer, who deposited five thousand dollars just before he came into the saloon, looked at you very queerly when you were giving an account of finding the cashier," Brunelle observed irrelevantly, thinking it best to change the subject before Marge said something sarcastic.

"He can't help that. He was born queer," Bud retorted. "Meanest old skinflint in the country. Took a quirting from my uncle before the whole town, and never has made a move to get back at Lark for it. Maybe that's why he looks queer when he sees some one from the Meadowlark."

"But he sneered as if he thought you were lying," Lawrie persisted.

"Well, so did I sneer as if I thought he were lying when he told about depositing five thousand dollars in the bank. I bet he keeps his money buried back of the barn or some other good place."

"I wish we'd buried ours," Marge sighed.

"Or the editors would wake up and buy a story or something. We'll have to hunt some work to do, Lawrie—"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Marge. Mr. Larkin knows of a school you can teach. He says the Meadowlark school needs a teacher. And perhaps I can get a job somewhere close, as a cowboy. Do you think I could, Mr. Larkin?"

"How do we get there?" Marge began to untie her apron as if she meant to start within the next five minutes. Bud caught his breath and opened his mouth to explain, to temporize. But Marge was already beginning to pack her books, and her eyes were the brightest, dancingest gray eyes he had ever looked into. His own kindled while he gazed.

So that is how it happened that young Bud Larkin, leaving his own tall sorrel in Delkin's stable as hostage of a sort, drove blithely out to the Meadowlark with a hired team and a spring wagon and two passengers squeezed into the front seat with him and three trunks piled high and tied there with Bud's good grass rope.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WAYS AND MEANS

When the hired rig from Smoky Ford swung through the gate and on up to the very porch of the house, with Bud grinning impudently at his world from the driver's seat and a strange young woman wedged in between him and a young man who bore all the earmarks of a pilgrim, and three huge trunks lashed to the back of the vehicle to say that the visitors had come to stay, Lark stood in the doorway and stared dazedly, with never a word of welcome for the strangers.

But Maw did not hesitate or question. Instead, she hurried out — walking erect under Lark's braced arm in the doorway with plenty of room to spare — and waddled to the edge of the porch, smiling unabashed. Marge almost screamed at sight of her.

"Get right down and come on in," Maw cried. "Supper's about ready. As luck would have it, I killed that speckled hen that wanted to set and cooked her with dumplings. We're almost ready to sit down, and I'll bet you're hungry!"

Bud had swung his long legs out over the wheel and landed beside her, and Marge was shocked to see him lift the misshapen creature clear of the ground and kiss her on each leathery cheek before he set her down again and turned to help Marge out.

"Maw, this is Miss Brunelle. She's going to teach school here. And this is her brother, Lightfoot. He's going to be cowboy. Hello, Lark. Say, I promised Lightfoot that you'd give him a job so he can be with his sister while she teaches school. Where's Skookum?"

"Oh, he went down to feed the cougar. I'm so glad we're going to have a school," cried Maw, without batting an eye or waiting for Lark to struggle through a sentence. "Larkie's real glad too. Of course he'll put Mr. Lightfoot right to work. Now, come right in, folks, and take off your things while I put on a couple more plates. Buddy, I'm afraid we haven't a room ready for Mr. Lightfoot—"

"He can bunk with me to-night," Bud interrupted, glancing up from unroping the trunks. "Say, Lark, the bank was robbed yesterday and the cashier killed. That's why I didn't get in quicker. I had to stay for the inquest this morning. No sign of the bunch that did it." The

trunks thudded one by one to the porch. "It happened just before I went to cash that check. Say, Maw, Lightfoot's name is Brunelle, same as his sister, if you want to Mister him."

He stepped on the hub of the front wheel and went up, unwrapping the lines from around the whipstock as he did so. Lark came to life then and climbed in and stood behind the seat while Bud drove back to the stable.

Sprawled before the bunk house, the Meadowlark riders were taking in the smallest details of the amazing arrival and trying not to appear curious, or even interested. But Jake, permanently crippled in one leg from lying out all one night under his dead horse, got up and limped leisurely down to the stable to help take care of the team. Lark saw him coming and hastened his speech.

"Bud, where in the name of Jonah did you pick up them pilgrims? And what's this here joke about a school-teacher fer the Meddalark? Where'd you git 'em — and their *trunks?*" The last three words sounded very much like a groan.

"Say, I didn't *steal* 'em," Bud flashed back meaningly.

"No — I'll bet you didn't git the chancet. I bet they grabbed you —"

Bud whirled on him, straight brows pulled together. If he began to see the foolishness of his impulsive hospitality, he never would admit it.

"Look here, Lark, these are nice folks, and they were up against it when the bank was robbed and they couldn't get a two-bit piece of their money out. Strangers, fresh from the East somewhere; came out here with the wild idea they can write and illustrate stories of the West and sell them to magazines. Maybe they can do it, but they sound too darned amateurish to me. And they were *broke,* I tell you!

"So she wanted to teach school or something — and you know darned well, Lark, that Skookum ought to be learning to read before he's sent off to school. All the kids would guy the life out of him if he landed without having some kind of a start in schooling at his age. And as for Lightfoot, he won't be the first tenderfoot that had to learn which end of a horse is the front." He stopped and glanced toward the house, where Maw was calling through the dusk that supper was all on the table. "And my thunder, Lark," he added as a clincher, "you never leave the Basin without bringing back something to take care of and feed; even if you have to steal him. You'd have done this yourself."

Lark lifted his hat, pawed absently at his hair and set the hat at a different angle as they started back to the house, waving their hands before their faces to keep off the mosquitoes whose droning hum was audible throughout the Basin after sundown when the dew began falling.

"Shore you'd 'a' done it, Bud, if the girl had been cross-eyed?" he thrust slyly at Bud's well-known liking for pretty faces.

"No, I don't know as I would," Bud admitted with shameless candor. "She isn't any prettier than Bonnie Prosser, though — and she hasn't the brains that Bonnie has, and no sense of humor whatever. I'll bet, if you pinned her right down to it, she'd admit that she thinks cowboys eat grass when they're on the range. You ought to hear the questions she asked about us, coming out.

"Lightfoot's all right, though. He'll break in and be human long before she will. You'll like Lightfoot, even if he is green; one good thing, he knows it. And Marge is a darn pretty girl, all right, even if she did get all her brains out of books. She can teach Skookum and get him ready for school —"

"Oh, all right, all right!" Lark yielded wearily to end the argument. "But if this habit of

hauling in the helpless is going to run in the family, son, we'll have to start in ridin' with a long rope and a runnin' iron, to feed 'em all. And what'll Bonnie say, Bud, when she hears about it? And a dozen other girls that have kept their dads broke buyin' hair ribbons for you to decorate yore bridle with?"

"Say, there aren't a dozen girls in the country; not white ones, and I don't take to color," Bud retorted equably. "And as for Bonnie — I'm not halter-broke yet, if you want to know, Lark."

At the porch Marge stood looking out over the dusky Basin to where the moon was beginning to gild the clouds on the hilltops beyond the Little Smoky.

"You know, I never dreamed that you had frogs away out West in Montana!" she cried in her pretty, eager way when the two approached. "They sound exactly like the frogs back in Iowa, too."

"Well, they're Iowa frogs, that's why," Bud explained matter-of-factly. "Way it happened was this: When the first white woman came with her husband and settled in this country, she had to teach the kids herself and she was a real conscientious mother. Whenever she sung them that song about 'There was a frog lived in a well,

humble-jumble-jerry-jum,' they kept asking her what frogs were. So the next time a trainload of beef went to Chicago she had the cowboys stop off in Iowa and catch a few jars of pollywogglers and bring back with them. There were twice as many as she needed, so she sent a jar over to the Meddalark. They've done real well," he added, stopping to listen to the steady singsong chorus down in the meadow. "One trouble is, they brought in mosquitoes same time. Said the farmers back in Iowa told them frogs wouldn't live where they couldn't get mosquitoes in season. The boys sure brought a plenty — or else our breed of frogs are light eaters. We've got more mosquitoes than we need right now."

"Well," said Marge, all unsuspecting, "of course I knew the frogs must have come from *somewhere,* and I noticed that they sounded exactly like our frogs back home."

That is why Lark kept eyeing the girl curiously all through supper.

But the unexpected addition to the Meadowlark family could not crowd from Lark's mind the startling news of the tragedy in Smoky Ford; nor from the uneasy thoughts of Bud, who felt keenly that he had failed Lark in a certain important matter.

The two gravitated together without a word or look that signified intention and strolled silently out away from the house to a bowlder fallen from the crown of the bluff and lying solitary and conveniently out of earshot yet within sight of everything. Even in Lark's tempestuous youth the bowlder had been called the Council Rock because of its frequent occupation when confidences were to be exchanged. A faint trail led toward it through the sparse grass at the base of the bluff, proof that it was still popular. Bud climbed up to the broad, flat top and sat down, dangling his legs over the edge of the gray rock while he produced tobacco and papers.

"That check — Lark, I feel that I owe you fifteen hundred dollars," he began abruptly. "I was so darned thirsty and hot when I came down off the reservation that I didn't go straight to the bank as I should have done. I stopped at the Elkhorn for a glass of beer. Lightfoot was in there and let himself be bullied into dancing for Steve Godfrey's bunch of souses, and I played the mouth-harp for him. I guess I wasted nearly half an hour altogether before I started to the bank. At that," he added, pausing to run the tip of his tongue along the edge of the filled paper, "I was in time — or I would have been if the

bank had been left alone. But if I had gone there at first I'd have been in time to prevent a murder and cash your check."

"Damn' expensive beer the Elkhorn's sellin'," Lark commented dryly. "What about the Fryin' Pan?"

"They've sure got a lot of dandy horses, Lark," Bud told him, relieved at the change of subject. "I had to do a lot of jewing on the price, but I got the promise of a hundred head for fifteen hundred dollars; forty young mares, and the rest geldings two and three years old. Just right to break, most of them are. You might be able to stand Kid off for the money, seeing the bank was robbed, but I don't know. I told him it would be cash down. Kid said he never bothered with checks at all — you had the right hunch there. He hinted strongly for gold too. Said he'd burned a thousand dollars of paper money by accident once, and he's nervous about having it around."

"Yeah, I wouldn't be su'prised if he is!" Lark laughed to himself. "My Jonah, I shore do want that bunch of horses! You say the bank's put out of business?"

"That's what Delkin said. They may get organized again after a while — or they may get the

money back, of course. I'd have wondered if the Frying Pan didn't know something about that affair—" He stopped and emptied his lungs of smoke. "But I saw the whole outfit at the ranch. Butch Cassidy's working for them this summer. I wish we could get those horses some way. They promised to hold the bunch close in, because I told them you'd be right over. I expect they're watching the trail for us right now."

"Too bad." Lark absently reached for his own "makin's." "Forty young mares, you say. Bud, I expect my old man would just about peel the hide off me if he was alive, but I'll be darned if I can set still and let that bunch of horses git out from under the old Meddalark iron. I'm goin' to hit the trail fer Glasgow and borry a couple or three thousand dollars. That'll run us till shippin' time if Delkin don't open up agin. First time the Meddalark ever borried, but I plumb got to have them horses!"

"I'll give you a bill of sale of a thousand head of my cattle, Lark. I'll feel better about the whole business if you'll use my stock for security on a loan, and it will save the Meadowlark from having a mortgage plastered on it."

"You keep what cattle you got, son. I'll make out all right. Can't tell how soon you might

wanta set up fer yourself. The marryin' notion hits kinda sudden when she strikes —"

"Say, I'll sell out the whole bunch if you don't shut up. I want you to borrow on my cattle if you must get a loan, and I suppose that's the only way out. Those Frying Pan horses are sure dandies. There's one favor I want to ask if you do get them, Lark. I'd like to have a couple of the geldings to break for my own string. There are two blacks, dead ringers for each other, that are beauts. I want them both. Half brothers, I'd say; going on four; clean-limbed and short-coupled, with forequarters like a lion, and their eyes are plumb human. They'd make a peach of a matched driving team, but I want them to ride. Butch says he got a saddle on one and started to ride him, and it bucked, high, wide and handsome, until it was a relief to get thrown clean over the fence. But I'll bet I can gentle the two of them so they'll be like pet dogs. Lark, I want them!"

"Yeah, I kinda thought mebbe you did," Lark chuckled. "All right, son. I'll take the bill of sale and use it for security on a loan (I know where I can get money in Glasgow without the hull darn country knowin' the Meddalark's borryin' money), and you can have your two black bronchs fer keeps. I'll give you the papers

for 'em, and you can put the one-legged Meddalark on 'em to show they're yourn. That'll be for int'rust on the use of your stock for a few months. How's that strike yuh? "

" Fine and dandy, Lark. Maybe you'll want to back down on your bargain when you've seen them, but I'll hold you to it. Kind of low-down, but darn it, I fell in love with those blacks, and I'd have to fight the boys away from them if they got a sight of them before any promise passed. And I had a long, hot ride in the wind, going to the Frying Pan, and talked myself black in the face getting the hundred head at that price. Kid was asking two thousand even for the bunch, but I made him see where the cash in his hand was worth something, and I told him fifteen hundred was your limit. Any other outfit would probably stand him off for part of it, and that's what turned the trick. And by the way, Lark, you'd better go prepared to bring back the gold, because Kid might be persuaded to throw in a few yearlings extra. They've got some good-looking colts over there. Most of the mares have got sucking colts, by the way."

" I'll borry three thousand, and get it all in gold," Lark planned. " I'll take a valise along, and carry the weight easy enough without it being

noticed. I'll likely stay over a day in Glasgow, anyway."

"Make it as quick a trip as you can, Lark. You must bear in mind that Kid expects us to-night, and I wouldn't want the deal to fall through because he got tired of waiting. He's touchy as the devil — and if I don't get those two black bronchs, I'll die!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

BUD HOLDS COUNCIL WITH HIMSELF

When he sauntered down from the Council Rock in the full flood of moonlight, left Lark to enter the house alone and continued to the bunk house, where the boys still lingered by the doorway, Bud did not look like a man whose life depends upon getting a pair of black bronchos into his possession. His walk and his softly whistled tune betokened care-free youth.

Cigarettes pricked little, red stars in the line of shadow before the long, low-roofed building where the riders of the Meadowlark were housed and fed to their complete content. The murmur of voices dwindled so that the frog chorus came sharp to the ears as Bud came up and squatted on his boot-heels alongside a man whom he identified even in the shadow as his particular friend, Frank Gelle — called Jelly with a frank disregard for proper pronunciation.

"Have a good trip, Bud?" Not for a top horse would Gelle have betrayed his curiosity over the mysterious visitors.

"Pretty fair. Hot as blazes riding across the reservation yesterday. Oh, by the way, Rosy, I didn't get those socks you wanted if I rode back through town. I meant to, but when the bank was robbed—"

"Get out!" Gelle exclaimed, as an expression of surprise. "Some of these days, Bud, somebody's goin' to lose his patience all of a sudden. He'll just kill you and drag you off somewhere and leave you. I hate to do it, but you won't be human till somebody asks the question, so who's the girl you brought in?"

"The girl? Oh, she's Lightfoot's sister. She's going to teach our school, Jelly."

"School?" chorused six shaken voices.

"Now I *know* you're lying, Bud," Gelle mourned. "I've got to have a serious talk with you, I kin see that. This habit of lyin' where there ain't no cause or provocation—if you'll walk awn over to the Rock with me now, Bud, I'll tell you what I think about it."

"It's him that'll do the tellin', and that right now," a voice broke in ominously. "They's a certain Meddalark that won't have a damn' chirp left in 'im, time we git the pinfeathers plucked out. Us fellers have stood about all we're goin' to from Bud."

"Just another prophet in his own country," sighed Bud, reaching out a hand for Gelle's tobacco sack because he was too lazy to reach into his pocket for his own. "She *is* Lightfoot's sister. And the bank *was* robbed, and Charlie Mulholland was killed. I discovered him myself—"

Half an hour went to the telling of the story to the smallest detail, accurately as if he were talking before a jury. For when all the jokes were done, Bud appreciated the hunger these young men felt for news of their world after plugging hard on round-up. They were sick of their own stale company and they craved action, even the vicarious excitement of Bud's experiences. He gave them all he knew, and by the time he had exhausted his store of impressions each man there could visualize the whole affair so far as Bud knew it.

They discussed at length the mystery of its quiet perpetration on the edge of banking hours while forty or fifty men foregathered within gunshot of the place. Then Tony Scarpa, more American than his name implied, swung to the more immediate event.

"Who's Lightfoot and who's his sister, and what's the joke about teaching our school?"

"Straight goods." In the narrowing shadow as the moon swam higher they could see Bud's eyes gleam with mischief. "Lightfoot's a pilgrim; an artist, so he says. I know he's a darn good dancer, for I saw him dance. His sister's a pilgress. They went broke when the bank did, and had to rustle jobs — being perfect strangers in the country and having a bad habit of eating every day. She wanted a school to teach. That's the first and only thing a girl from the East ever thinks of when she comes West; that and marrying some cattle king and wearing diamonds. He wanted to be a cowboy — and I, being an accommodating cuss, gave them both jobs. I recalled the fact that there's a lot you fellows don't know yet, and while you're acquiring useful knowledge she can study your types. You see —"

"Study our *what?*" A man leaned forward so that the moon shone fully and clearly on his astonished face.

"Study your types. She's an amateur author and she means to write stories about cowboys. So she's looking for good types."

"Sa-ay!" Tony's irrepressible drawl cut musically through the amazed silence. "Loan me your type, will yuh, Bob? I lost mine back there where I bulldogged that roan steer."

"I will not! I'm goin' to need all the type I got. Is she purty, Bud?"

"She sure is." Bud glanced up at the moon and softly rhapsodized, "Big, devilish gray eyes — they'd drown a man's troubles so deep he'd swear he never had one. Her mouth — if her mouth has never been kissed it should be."

"It's goin' to be," Tony murmured, and made a motion of rising to his feet. Big Bob Leverett yanked him down.

"You ain't in this, Tony. Bud's givin' *me* the dope. You gwan to bed. You ain't got no type, and there ain't nothin' to set up for!"

"Law-zee, *boss!*" cried a tall young man with unbelievably small feet thrust straight out before him into the moonlight. "Here's one scholar that'll sure never be tardy!"

"I'm goin' to whisper an' stick out my tongue at you pelicans, and git to stay after school," Gelle declared.

"You — you fellers can go to her darned old school, but I won't," a young, rebellious voice cried from within the open door.

"Skookum?" Bud leaned and peered into the dark. "Come on out here, pardner. Why aren't you in bed?"

"How'd the kid git in?" Gelle swung his lean

body sidewise, reached a long arm into the house and plucked the boy expertly by his middle. "Here he is, Bud. Clumb through the window, I reckon."

Skookum wriggled free and sat down in the dirt, crossing his legs and folding his arms in exact imitation of Bud's favorite pose when at ease among his fellows. He glanced up and down the row of cowpunchers leaning against the wall, and the moonlight gilded his hair like a halo and made of his eyes two deep, dark pools.

"I don't like her," he stated flatly. "She turned up her nose at — at Maw, and she asked her brother if he s'posed that hid-hid-e-ous creature was any relation to — to Bud. She said she couldn't bear to — to eat Maw's cookin' 'cause it was 'pulsive. And it was chicken dumpluns and — and pie!"

Dead silence for a space; then Gelle spoke diffidently, uncertain between apology and resentment.

"We get you, Skookum. But you see, Maw — well, she needs to be took kinda gradual, right at first. You know Maw's a kinda hard looker till you git used to her —"

"Maw's the purtiest woman in — in Montana!" Skookum declared hotly. "She's cute

and — and sweet. When I get big, I'm agoin' to — to marry Maw. I asked her, and she said she — she would. You shut up about Maw. She's purtier than that darned old girl! Ain't she, Bud?"

"Handsome is as handsome does makes Maw the most beautiful woman in the world. You're right about that, pardner." Bud's voice had a queer note in it. "You stand up for Maw, Skookum, and I'm right with you. But I don't believe Maw would want you to pass up a chance to learn something. She thought it would be just fine to have a school here. It's that, or go to a boarding school where all the boys would laugh at you, and I don't believe Maw could stand that, pardner. It seems to me that your duty to Maw would make you want to learn just as fast as you can from Miss Brunelle."

"I don't care! She's a mean old —"

"Careful, Skookum. Never call a woman names — and besides, in this case it isn't fair. Miss Brunelle's an orphan, and she's among strangers, and she was all tired out — and you know yourself that even Lark can't stand it to see Maw with her teeth out and laid up on a shelf somewhere. I couldn't get her off to one side and speak to her about it before strangers, and

neither could Lark. But Maw ought to have thought of it herself and put in her teeth when she saw company coming."

"Well, maybe she's purtier with — with her teeth on. But I bet if that old girl's teeth wabbled like — like Maw's teeth do, she wouldn't wear 'em, either. They tip up on the side and — and pinch. Maw showed me!"

"Well, then, we'll let Maw suit herself about it. Miss Brunelle will gentle down and get used to her, teeth or no teeth. It's like a horse getting accustomed to a yellow slicker," he went on. "He always stampedes at first. He'll pitch and strike and raise Cain generally — but there always comes a time when that same old yellow slicker feels mighty good spread over his back when he's humped up in a cold rain. We won't say a word, pardner. We'll just go along as if we didn't notice anything, and you'll see how soon Miss Brunelle will learn to love Maw."

"And — and Maw needn't wear her teeth if — if she don't want to," Skookum stipulated earnestly, "unless Lark ketches her w-without 'em."

"That's the idea, exactly," Bud assured him as man to man. "You see, Lark feels sensitive about Maw's teeth, because he took a beeswax

impression himself and sent it to a dentist that advertised pretty extensively and wrote that teeth could be made by what Lark called absent treatment. He'd hate like thunder to admit he'd made a fizzle of the job, and Maw wouldn't for the world hurt his feelings by telling him straight out that they don't fit. So there you are, and we'll just have to let them manage the affair themselves, and show Miss Brunelle what we think of Maw, teeth or no teeth."

Skookum nodded acquiescence, heaving a great sigh of relief.

"I was goin' to — to tell Maw what that girl said. But — but I'm glad I never."

"Real men don't repeat things that may cause hard feelings. You remember that, Skookum. If you'd gone tattling that, Maw would have felt badly and cried."

In the moonlight they could see how the boy's big eyes brimmed suddenly.

"Maw does — every time I change my shirt. It's where grandpa quirted me, and — and the marks is there."

"Grandpa — hunh! I'll grandpa that old devil if I ever run across him," Frank Gelle rapped out viciously.

"You leave grandpa alone! I'm waitin' till —

till I get big as Bud, and then grandpa's — my meat!"

"There's Maw calling you to go to bed," Bud reminded him hastily — and unnecessarily, since Maw's voice was full size and not to be ignored. "Come on — I feel like rolling in, myself. Let's go pound our ears, as Shakespeare says."

But when Skookum had been safely delivered to Maw, Bud strolled back to the Council Rock, which was usually free from the humming hordes of mosquitoes, and where the acrid smoke of the smudges were but a pleasantly faint aroma. Thinking was not a popular pastime with young Bud Larkin as a rule, but nevertheless there were times when he felt the need of a quiet hour to meditate upon late impressions and events, especially when they came thick and fast, as the last two days had brought them.

For one thing, he was depressed over the murder of the bank cashier and he felt more responsibility in the matter than he had owned to Lark. There was no getting around the fact that he might have prevented the whole thing had he gone straight to the bank instead of stopping at the Elkhorn. When he thought how that one glass of beer had cost a man's life, Bud felt as if he never wanted another drink. He rolled and

smoked a cigarette while he recalled each incident of yesterday afternoon.

Palmer's peculiar look when Bud had first tried to open the saloon door, for instance. Did that mean anything more than a natural enmity toward a Meadowlark man and a malicious satisfaction in knowing that the door was locked? According to his own voluntary statement at the inquest, Palmer had just come from the bank where he had made a deposit of five thousand dollars, the price of a herd of cattle which he had sold to the Government for the Indians; so he said, and two men present had borne out the statement regarding the sale. The pass book which he exhibited showed the amount, in Charlie's meticulous figures — perhaps the last he had written. Palmer, of course, couldn't have robbed the bank, for Bud felt sure that Charlie had not been dead so long when he discovered him.

The locking of the saloon door might have been a suspicious circumstance, but there also Bud felt baffled by the plausibility of the incident. Steve Godfrey frequently "bought" whatever place he chanced to celebrate in after a sale of stock that made him feel rich for a day or two. He too had sold cattle for use on the reservation. Buying a place in which to entertain all the loose men in

town was merely a figurative purchase, meaning that all drinks were free for an hour or two, and that Steve would pay double for everything and waken next morning with a head the size of a barrel — according to his belief — and would forswear strong drink for a month or two thereafter.

No, Bud decided, the locking of the Elkhorn door had been merely a coincidence that facilitated the murder and robbery.

But there was the mysterious incident of the four shod horses which had no riders, galloping out across the river to mingle unrecognizably with the herd on the high plateau, mostly saddle horses and half-broken bronchos turned loose after the spring round-up to fatten on the sweet bunch grass of the higher ground until September brought shipping time and another strenuous season of work.

The Meadowlark horses had grazing grounds across the river, and so had several other outfits. Bud had not won close enough to read the brands on the herd which the four had joined, but he felt certain that they were not Meadowlark horses. Indeed, he could recognize their own herd as far as he could distinguish the individual animals.

But why had four riderless horses left the outskirts of town at that particular time and scurried

out across the range to the west? To hide for a time the route taken by the robbers, Bud was certain; and admitted that it was a clever ruse, spoiled only by the quick action he himself had taken. Or had the robbers ridden the horses out of town and turned them loose to seek their own herd later on, hiding themselves and their saddles in some rocky gulch where the tracks would not show? Bud wished that he had thought of that sooner, though it seemed a far-fetched possibility.

Then there was Bat Johnson, a Palmer man and the only person Bud had seen in the vicinity of the bank. But Bat had made no attempt to escape, and he had volunteered the information about the horses that crossed the river. Bat had not taken the trail through the dry wash back of town where the four horses must have been concealed, because, as he explained at the inquest, his pack horse was barefooted, which Bud knew was the truth. The wash was gravel and loose rocks, and Bat had taken the longer trail through the sand grass and the willows. According to his statement to Bud and at the inquest, Bat had a glimpse of the horses moving out of sight among the willows near the ford, and had taken it for granted that riders bestrode them. But his pack

horse, a little pinto, was hard to lead at the beginning of a trip, and Bat had been busy arguing the matter — Bat's side of the argument being the end of the lead rope or a quirt, Bud shrewdly guessed.

"I guess that lets him out," Bud muttered finally. "And I can't sleuth it out to-night. But there's another day coming. Marge will have to be blindfolded, I expect, to get her into what we'll have to call a schoolroom. Hm-m-m. Asked me where the town is, when we started down the pass. Wonder what time Lark wants to start in the morning? Have to explain to Lightfoot what a horse is, in the morning, and initiate him into the mysteries of a saddle. I like that geezer, somehow. He's the stuff, even if he is green. Wel-l — I guess I'll go to bed."

This, merely to show you that Bud could smile into a pretty girl's eyes and still keep his head clear for other things, and go about his business untroubled by dreams and fancies.

CHAPTER NINE

BUTCH CASSIDY GIVES ADVICE

Lark rode moodily up to the rim of the Basin and halted there, as was his habit, and gazed down upon meadow, field, small orchard and the chain of corrals, with the house and two or three cabins sitting back against the bold cliff that shut in the upper end of the river valley like a wall. Ages ago the river, then a glacial stream, no doubt, had gouged and dug at the hills until it had made a fair retreat just here along its bank; had shrunk as the climate changed and dried; left the valley a fertile place with seeds of trees and grasses and wild flowers imbedded in the soil. Birds had come there to nest, and in the spring the air was all vibrant with the sweet, rippling notes of the meadowlark and robin and the little wild canaries.

Old Bill Larkin had ridden into the valley by chance and had liked it well enough to appropriate it and build in it his home. Meadowlark Basin he called it — having come in the spring. Later he brought cattle and horses, when the pioneers were just awaking to the fact that Montana

was an ideal grazing country. Some called old Bill a rustler — said his cattle and horses were mostly stolen. But they did not say it to his face, for old Bill was also called a killer. At any rate he owned a certain whimsical sentiment, for he fashioned the crude outline of a bird (though in the state brand book it was called the Half-moon-open-A) and stamped it deep in the hides of every hoof of stock he called his own. Moreover, he held his own against brand-blotters and prospered.

Now Lark stared glumly down into the Basin and wished his old dad was alive and able to take a hand in the fight he felt was coming. But old Bill lay deep in the grove of cottonwoods between the river and the house, and Lark glanced that way as he swung back into the road. Bud's horse — called the Walking Sorrel because of his gait — tilted his ears forward and picked up his feet with the springy, eager steps of a horse glad to be home after an absence. At the foot of the hill he broke into a gallop that Lark did not check until they reached the yard by the shed where the saddles were housed.

Lark slipped out of the saddle and was untying the valise from behind the cantle when Bud strolled down to greet him. He glanced over his

shoulder, then handed the valise to Bud, who judged the weight of it and grinned.

"Got it, I see. You weren't held up then," he said. "I thought afterwards that you shouldn't have gone alone, but I see it was all right, after all."

Lark jerked off the saddle and led the horse to a gate and turned him through without speaking. The two started for the house, walking side by side up the roadway.

"Boys all here?" Lark spoke abruptly.

"Sure. They're eating supper. Butch Cassidy rode over from the Frying Pan yesterday to see why we hadn't come after the horses. I think Kid wants that fifteen hundred all right. Butch is waiting to ride back with us." Bud changed hands on the valise, for ten pounds added to the ordinary weight of a leather grip well filled is distinctly noticeable. "Have a good trip, and did you hear anything about the robbery?"

"Yeah, to both questions. Take that grip on into my room, son, and come over to the bunk house. I wanta talk to the boys."

"*Oh* — oh!" Bud exclaimed under his breath, and made off in a hurry. Lark in that mood promised action in plenty, and action meant joy in the heart of young Bud. He passed Marge

without a word of teasing, which gave that young woman an uneasy half-hour, thinking she had somehow offended her perfect type of cowboy.

"Now's a good time to break the news to you pelicans," Lark began abruptly, when the preliminary greetings were over and Bud had arrived and sat down expectantly on the end of the long bench at the supper table. "Butch, it won't hurt nothin' for you to set in on this yoreself. Suspicions is like measles; once they start they spread through a hull neighborhood.

"To cut it short, they're tryin' their helldarnedest, down Smoky Ford way, to pin that killin' and bank robbery on to the Meddalark. Soon as they find out where Bud come from that day they're liable to throw in the Fryin' Pan outfit fer luck. And my Jonah, I lost over fifteen thousand dollars to them thieves!"

"Pin it on us!" Bud voiced the incredulity of the group. "How do they make that out, Lark? I was in the Elkhorn —"

"Yeah — and Delkin told me they're sayin' that you was in there spottin' for the bunch that done the dirty work, son. You left the saloon and put straight fer the bank — to make sure it was all over and done without a hitch — and then you put out across the hills, mebbe for a blind, mebbe

to help the get-away. Delkin don't believe nothin' like that, of course; but that's the story that's being circulated around town. He just give me the tip in a friendly way, so we'd know how to shape our plans."

"Pull in the corners, hunh?" Frank Gelle snorted.

"Pull in nothin'!" Lark's kindly hazel eyes hardened. "I'll tell you now, boys, I went on to Glasgow and borried some money to buy them Fryin' Pan horses and run the outfit on till the bank kinda pulls itself together again. Whilst the money lasts, I'm goin' to pay you rannies in gold. If yo're scared to show it, fer fear some one may think it's stole, you can go hide it under yore bunks. Delkin said he'd try and find out who's doin' all the gabbin' about us. He thinks it was started by somebody that's got a grudge agin the Meddalark — and, my Jonah! I can think of plenty that has! You dang pelicans go larry-whoopin' around the country, lickin' this one and that one, till the hull country's down on us, chances are!"

"Couldn't be somebody *you've* run a sandy on, of course," Gelle hinted mildly, and lowered an eyelid at the others.

"Palmer, you mean? He's got as good cause

as anybody." Lark made no attempt to hedge. "Could be. Still, there's somethin' happened that Palmer didn't have no hand in, that I don't savvy. Up in Harlem I was waitin' to git my ticket, and my grip was settin' on a bench behind me in the waitin' room, and two different jaspers sneaked up and *hefted* it. Didn't know I seen 'em, but I caught 'em out the tail of my eye. *And that was goin' out!* At the time I thought they was lookin' fer easy stealin' and lost their nerve; or mebbe was curious to know if I had a gun or a bottle cached inside. Now, I know they was jest heftin' to see if I had the bank loot, er some of it. There was a lot of gold in the vault, Delkin told me. Detectives on my trail, mebbe. When I come back, I was packin' about ten pounds more weight, but I never let that grip outa my hands, you might say. I told Delkin about it, after he'd spilled his news, and showed him where I'd borried some money — just in case the talk gits too dang loud. He swore the bank never sicked no detectives on to us, nor anybody else in particular. Them bank officers don't dare give a guess at who done it, looks like to me. It *could* be what they call an inside job, and they know it don't look too good fer the bank officers."

"The thing to do," Butch Cassidy advised, "is

lay low till somebody tips their hands. They'll do it — never knowed it to fail." He grinned and reached for the sirup can. "Way Bud was tellin' me, I'd say that hold-up job was a strictly home product. What do you think, Lark?"

"My Jonah!" Lark gave an exasperated snort. "I ain't any artist in that line, Butch. Looks to me like a daylight robbery with murder throwed in is something that takes nerve, and them town roosters don't qualify, if you want my opinion."

Butch chewed and swallowed a huge bite of hot biscuit dripping with sirup, his eyes staring vacantly before him as if he visioned things afar. Lark was calling for a clean plate and a cup of coffee, his long ride having given him a clamorous appetite which the supper table only aggravated.

"Bud was tellin' me about a few head of loose horses bein' hazed outa town and across the river right after the job at the bank." Butch came out of his trance and turned again to Lark. "Looks to me like that was meant fer a blind. Otherwise, the feller that drove 'em wouldn't make no bones of tellin' about it.

"And here's another point you don't want to overlook, none of you: Smoky Ford sets wrong

fer a bank robbery to be pulled off durin' the day. Bank's away down at the wrong end of the street, and them cutbanks and washes where the bench breaks off down to the river bottom ain't rideable, except along the road. A bunch raidin' the bank would have to ride back through town and either cross the river or foller up the road to the bench, and take out across the reservation or come up this way. The trail across the river could be reached, uh course, by ridin' out back of town, the way Bat Johnson went with his pack outfit, but three or four riders foggin' along there would take big chances, seems to me. A job like that would need at least three men; two inside and one on guard outside the bank, jest in case anybody happened along. And even then it wouldn't be no picnic, right in daytime. With the town jammed into a pocket in the hills like that, and only two get-away trails, and them either leadin' around town or through it, they'd have to want money worse'n what I do." He laughed dryly.

"Them loose horses shod all around and takin' out across the river to the hills — that looks too much like a blind trail to me. Nobody was seen ridin' through town, so after a play like that, what I'd guess they done was git to the river bank

and drop on down river in a boat." Butch Cassidy, vaguely rumored to be something of an outlaw himself, spoke as one who knew the tricks of the trade.

"River's too dang treacherous, down below the ford," Lark objected, with his mouth full. "It could be done, mebbe, but nobody in a hurry would ever think of doin' it. Moreover, what with rapids and bars and quicksands, there ain't a boat on the river anywhere; not that I know of."

"My — my grandpa was — was makin' a boat," the eager voice of Skookum broke in upon them. "In a shed where — where calves was weaned."

"Palmer, hunh?" Butch turned and stared reflectively at the boy, whom no one had noticed in the bunk house. A silence followed; a startled pause, as if each mind there took hold of the statement and turned it about and eyed it with surprised attention. Only Butch's light blue eyes, set close together, held a peculiar gleam.

"When was this, kid?"

"That was 'fore I come here with — with Lark. And — and —"

"Here! Quit that stutterin', kid, and take yore time." Lark spoke sharply, his eyes darting inquiring glances at Bud and the others.

"Tell it slow, Skookum, and be dang sure you tell it straight. It's liable to mean a lot. You say yore grandpa was makin' a boat. Did he say what for?"

Skookum shook his head, his eyes big and round with the thrill of giving information to all these gods and heroes whose deeds and lightest words were things to dwell upon.

"Bat Johnson was makin' it, and Ed White. When they caught me — peekin' in, Bat s-shook me and swore. And — he took me where grandpa — was. He said I was — sneakin' around where I didn't have no — business. And — and grandpa —" Skookum shut his eyes tightly for a moment. "If you please, I — can't tell it — please. It's when grandpa made them cuts —"

"You can skip all that," Lark gritted, while the others shuffled their feet uncomfortably, their faces going glum with anger against Palmer for his brutal beating of the boy. "And you needn't to worry; yore grandpa's got more marks than what you've got."

"He oughta be strung up by the heels over a slow fire," Tony muttered, with the exaggerated malevolence of one who indulges in strong figures of speech.

"Go on, kid. Did you hear what they was goin' to do with it?"

"No — only Bat said sinkin' it was easy."

"There's the clew to the robbery!" Bud leaned forward, the light of revelation in his eyes. "It's the last thing any one would think of, and about the easiest thing to do. Bat Johnson himself could have hazed those horses across the ford and come back after his pack horse. He could have done the murder and robbery too. If they had a boat hidden under the bank, he could have slipped out of the side door with all the plunder in a sack, packed it on his horse to the river, tossed it into the boat and gone on about his business — which was turning those horses loose and throwing them back across the river. I know where they were tied out of sight in the wash for an hour or two at least. It's so damned simple, Lark, it was practically safe!"

"It could be done," Lark agreed, "but they couldn't go on down river and stand a chance of getting anywhere."

"They wouldn't need to. Who would see a boat if it slipped down river from Palmer's place and went back the way it came? The farther bank is too rough to ride and too barren for stock to range close, and the current swings that way and

cuts close to shore. This side it's boggy wherever you can get to the bank, so all the town stock waters at the ford, where there's a streak of gravel bottom. The willows are thick as the hair on a dog, most places — though of course a man could crowd through to the bank, close enough to throw a bag or two. Why, at three o'clock or a little before, even the kids were all in school down at the other end of town, and every footloose man was locked inside the Elkhorn!"

"Palmer was in town, you said." Butch Cassidy's eyes had squinted half shut as his mind focused upon the robbery and shuttled back and forth from scene to scene.

"You're darned right he was in town. It was Palmer who locked the saloon door, and it was Palmer who seemed to hate the idea of having it opened when I started to leave. Steve did all the bellowing, but Palmer's face gave him away; he wanted that door to stay shut. Of course, he had just deposited five thousand dollars in the bank, and he's been making quite a holler, I suppose — at least, he did at the inquest. But maybe he put that money in the bank for that very reason, to give him something to howl about. What do you think, Lark?"

"I'd bet on it," Lark answered sententiously,

and with a three-tined fork turned over several pieces of beef fried so thoroughly that the meat was tender simply because it was too young to be tough under any mistreatment. He selected a particularly crisp piece, sawed off a corner with his knife and poised the morsel on the end of his fork.

"Oughta be some way to git the goods on that outfit. I've a dang good notion—"

"Better let it ride for a while," Butch counseled earnestly. "If it's them, they're bound to tip their hands; any mismove, and they'll be gone clean outa the country. Any of the bunch gone since it happened? What about Bat and his pack outfit? Did he leave with it?"

"Palmer sent him back home after the inquest. I overheard him telling Bat that some of them might have to join the manhunt and he'd better stay on the ranch in case he was needed," said Bud.

"None of 'em got out with the posse," Lark added. "Delkin told me the sheriff was handlin' it with his deppities, and said he didn't want the hull country messed up with tracks. Said it was time enough to make a general round-up when they picked up a trail of some kind. Good sense, too."

"How many men has Palmer got?" Butch wanted to know. "Not more'n three or four — he's too stingy to hire more'n he has to. Who works for yore gran'paw, kid?"

"Bat Johnson and Ed White, and — and Mex, and — and Blinker. But Blinker's no good. He — he's old and — and won't talk, and — and just whispers — to himself. He — he's afraid somebody's — comin' to — to kill him. And then there's the cook," Skookum added slightingly. "He's Sam, and — and he's a nigger."

"They're all to home," Gelle ended the discussion. "I and Bob met all three riders jest yeste'day drivin' a bunch of horses out towards the reservation."

"Got the stuff hid somewhere," Butch concluded. "That is, if they done the job. Thinkin' so ain't proof, we got to remember."

"Dang right it ain't," Lark agreed cynically. "They's folks in the country claims they think *we* done it, fur as that goes. That Maw callin' supper, Bud? You tell her I've et. By Jonah, I can't git no comfort out of a meal with them two pilgrims settin' there watchin' every mouthful and criticizin' my manners. I'll eat Jerry's cookin' fer a spell."

"I'm goin' to — to eat here," Skookum an-

nounced firmly. "I can't git no comfort, either. That old girl's learnin' me table etiquette! She makes me hold my fork like — like this!" To make his argument strong, Skookum grasped a fork as no human being would naturally hold one.

"Say," drawled Tony, "send her over here to eat with us, and you two gwan where you belong. Me, I never did know how to hold a fork in m' life. Why, I can't even hold a hayfork proper! You tell her, Skookum, that there ain't a one of us that's got the hang of makin' peas ride our knives without rollin' off. Jelly claims it's proper to mash 'em so they lay flat, but I say they was made to ride straight up. Gwan, kid. You tell 'er they's certain ones that needs to be learnt manners, and learnt 'em quick. Tell her we got a pelican here that whistles his soup 'stead of blowin' it gentle and then gulpin' 'er down. Gwan, kid."

"Yeah. Tell her I want t' know whether it's proper to say, 'Pass me those m'lasses,' or just 'Hand me them m'lasses.'" Bob Leverett winked at the others. "Tell 'er I'm liable to be invited out to a party, some time, an' I'm liable to make a bad break. Gwan, kid. You tell 'er that."

"Say, kid, you tell 'er I got another type she oughta study. Tell her this one is a sure-enough dinger, and that it's got the smile of a he-angel and the heart of a demon. It's this here sow-ayve kind, you tell 'er —"

"Soo-*ahve*, you darned knot-head," Gelle corrected disgustedly.

"Bud can tell her," Skookum stated calmly, and straddled the long bench to sit beside Lark. "I'm goin' to eat here."

"And hurt Maw's feelings?" Bud paused in the doorway and sent a glance of surprised disapproval at the boy. "She'll think you don't like her cooking any more."

"Aw, shucks!" Skookum threw down his knife and straddled back across the bench.

CHAPTER TEN

THE FRYING PAN

In that rare half-hour just before sunrise, when the cool breeze blowing across the meadows seemed saturated with sweetness and the vivifying essence of all life, as if here for a moment one might inhale the very breath which God breathed into his image made of clay and awakened it to the consciousness that it was a man, seven riders mounted at the Meadowlark corrals and went galloping down the trail, bound for the Frying Pan ranch, a long ride of forty miles through rough country.

Quivering drops of dew, scattered by eager hoofs, blinked at the first mellow sun rays and vanished from sight. Birds chirped and sang and flew here and there seeking breakfast for their hungry fledglings that would themselves soon be surprising the early worm. Every man's face was eager and alert, glad for no tangible reason save that it was good to be alive and on a horse, riding out in the cool of the morning once more after the leisurely two weeks just gone.

Lark was not among them, having made the excuse that he was tired from his trip to Glasgow; a thin excuse, for Lark could stay in the saddle as long as any man when the need arose. In reality Lark wanted to leave this horse-buying deal for Bud to handle alone. It was time, he thought, that the young man learned to assume some responsibility in a business way, and he was curious to see what sort of bargain Bud would make with the Frying Pan. So far Lark was secretly proud of his handsome young nephew whom he had cared for since he was a boy the size of Skookum, but for all that he was minded now to supplement Bud's schooling with a course of practical application of the lessons he had presumably learned from books.

The Meadowlark needed to build up its horse herd, and it was Bud himself who had suggested that they see what the Frying Pan had to offer. Lark did not think much of the Frying Pan, and Kid Kern, the owner, he did not trust at all; but he told Bud to go ahead and see what he could do over there with fifteen hundred dollars, intimating that he ought to be able to buy a hundred head of mixed stock for that amount.

Privately, Lark believed that the Frying Pan dealt mostly in "wet" stock — which is range

parlance for stolen stock. A fresh brand is a "wet" brand. Stolen horses or cattle must be rebranded, the original brand hidden under another. That detail, combined with the fact that stolen stock is rushed by forced drives to distant localities, gave rise to the term, and that term was applied in undertones to Frying Pan horses. Lark wondered if Bud knew that. But wet stock is usually good stock, and cheap — for cash. So Lark did not say anything to Bud. If the kid wanted advice he'd probably ask for it.

So Bud rode proudly at the head of the little cavalcade with fifteen hundred dollars in gold coin wrapped in his slicker and tied behind the cantle, and the cameo brooch pinning back his hat brim while a blue satin bow stolen laughingly from Marge sat perkily between the twitching ears of his horse — braided into the short hairs of the mane for safe-keeping. And Bud, the young devil, was not thinking of girls at all, but dreaming of those two black bronchos he meant to tame, and trying to think of names worthy their magnificent beauty. Stirrup to stirrup with him rode Frank Gelle, who sent a glance over his shoulder to see how close were the others when they slowed for the climb up through the pass.

"What was Butch quizzing Skookum about last night, Bud, down by the little corral?" he broke ruthlessly into Bud's meditations.

"Butch? I don't know, Jelly. I heard him say something about teaching the kid some bird-call or other." Bud, brought back to the present, bethought him that now was a good time to roll a smoke. He slipped the reins daintily between his third and little fingers and reached for tobacco sack and papers.

"Didn't sound like no birdcall to me, Bud. He was pumpin' the kid about something. I couldn't ketch none of the words, but I could tell by the tonation of his voice that he was askin' one question right on top of another. Do you reckon, Bud, he was snoopin' around tryin' to pump the kid about our pilgress?"

"Marge? No reason he should pump the kid about her. That girl's an open book — printed in clear type. She and Butch were having a great old visit down by the corral yesterday when he was showing off his fancy roping. You saw them, Jelly. I bet she was giving him her life history. A girl that's lived the pure, simple life Marge has will tell all about herself without much coaxing. I don't believe Butch would be a darn bit backward about asking her anything he wanted

to know. He must have been quizzing the kid about something else."

"She's a purty girl and a sweet girl, and no mother to guide her," Gelle eulogized solemnly. "No bonehead rustler like Butch Cassidy can run any rannigans whilst I'm on the job. If I was shore—"

"It wasn't that. Anyway, Marge can hold her own without any help. If you'd heard some of the roastings I've got, already — somebody told her I lied about our frogs. I never will be able to square myself, I guess. Say, Jelly, Butch may have been asking Skookum about that boat. He seemed pretty keen about it in the bunk house."

"Bud, I wouldn't put that bank job past the Fryin' Pan outfit, do you know it? From the way Butch talked, I'll bet they've been figuring on it, some time or other." Gelle sent another cautious glance over his shoulder.

"They didn't do it, Jelly. I left them all at the ranch, and rode straight across the reservation, the shortest way there is. I was expecting to make it home that night, you see. They couldn't have beaten me in. They were sitting around the house, whittling and telling it scarey, when I left, and their horses weren't caught up or anything. Butch may feel sore because some

one beat them to it, and if he thought the boodle was cached somewhere within reach —

"Tell you what I'm going to do, Jelly. Soon as we get back with the horses I'm going to do a little scouting around. I've thought of several places I want to take a look at. That yarn about how I was spotting for the gang that killed Charlie Mulholland — well, the quickest way to stop that is to pin it on the guilty parties. If it's a home job, as it looks to be, we can do as much as the sheriff toward getting them with the goods. And, Jelly, I may need you before I'm through."

"Well, now, you'd have a heck of a time tryin' to keep me out of the muss!" Gelle laughed to himself. "Here comes Butch, so I'll drop back with the roughnecks. I wouldn't trust Butch if I was you, Bud. He's a nice feller and all that, but he's a horse thief and a killer and I wouldn't trust him fur as I could throw a bull by the tail."

Bud was grinning at that when Butch rode up on his high-stepping brown horse, but he did not pass along the joke.

The Frying Pan ranch, so called because of the brand most used by the owners, lay a good day's ride from the Meadowlark, over near the Mis-

souri and close to that stretch of chaotic country called the Badlands. A small town might have stood on the level plateau against the hills, but as it was the Frying Pan ranch had a fine sweep of pasture land with a long lane running straight back to where the house, stable and corrals stood against the butte. Had the owners planned the place with an eye to the strategic possibilities, they could not have improved the smallest detail. First, the house, a two-story log building set well out in the open with a well and pump in one corner of the woodshed built against the kitchen. Beyond the house stood the barn, another log building with ample room for hay sufficient to winter eight or ten horses; and behind the barn the corrals, three of them in a string, with a branding chute between the two smaller ones and with a pair of funnel wings that never failed to ease the wildest broomtails into the enclosure left open to receive them. A somewhat elaborate arrangement, though the Frying Pan was a horse outfit that seemed to be making money faster than the cattlemen.

Range gossip is quite as malicious as a small-town club that is on the brink of disorganization. Range gossipers grinned at the Frying Pan brand, a blotched circle with the handle pointing

downward; very convenient to cover any small brand and blot it forever from sight; handier still to have the choice of left hip or shoulder. One might guess that another brand was buried beneath that burned circle, but who could swear to the fact?

Whether Bud knew the gossip or not, he did know good horses when he saw them, and it was with a glow of pride that he climbed the fence of the largest corral and roosted on the top rail with the other Meadowlark riders, all staring down at the circling, kicking, squealing, nipping herd which the Frying Pan boys had just whooped down the wings and inside. A pretty sight they were — one that brought a shine into eyes other than Bud's.

"I trimmed the bunch down to about three hundred while we had them up waiting for you to come over after them," Kid Kern shouted, climbing up to straddle the rail and sit beside Bud. "I knew pretty well what you didn't want. Some good stuff there, hunh?"

"I've seen worse pelters than these," Bud grinned. "Got any fillies you want to throw in as an honorarium to me for having Lark dig up the full price in gold?"

"Say, Bud! If you bring any honorariums on

to the ranch, by golly, you'll have to break 'em yourself!" Tony yelled, and winked at Jack Rosen. "They're tricky as hell, and you know it."

"Oh, I know you're not supposed to look a gift horse in the mouth," Bud retorted, "but I'll take a chance on five or six colts presented by Kid, here."

"If you put it that way, I might add half a dozen head; for you yourself, Bud. Gold is mighty useful to me, boy."

"You talk like good old greenbacks ain't money no more," Bob Leverett chided.

"There's a black gelding I'm going to build a loop for," Tony cried enthusiastically, and pointed to where a magnificent head and neck showed over the shoulder of a sorrel, the big brown eyes regarding curiously the strange row of figures on the fence.

"There's his twin, by golly! I speak fer him right now," Jack Rosen exclaimed.

"And they both belong to yours truly," Bud stated with outward calm. "Lark's giving them to me for making the deal, and my one-legged Meadowlark goes on to-morrow morning. You'll need darned fast loops, you fellows, to beat mine."

"My gosh, more honorariums!" wailed Tony. "Bud's bashful, I don't think!"

"Bud knows two good horses," Kid grinned, glancing sidelong toward Butch. "Them two blacks came"—he glanced again toward Butch and went on smoothly—"damn' near queering the deal. I didn't want to let them two go, but Bud, he couldn't see no bunch of horses that didn't include them, so I had to cave in or lose the sale. You'll have two dandy mounts, Bud, if you break 'em right."

"I don't intend to break them at all." Bud's eyes softened wonderfully as they rested on the nearest black horse. "All they need is to be taught. I'll have them both following me around like dogs, inside a month."

Butch lounged over and leaned against the fence near where Bud was perched. His hatcrown reached to Bud's knees, and he stared into the restless herd that crowded to the far side of the corral. His lip lifted a bit at one corner.

"Look out fer hydrophoby, then," he drawled. "One of 'em is a mankiller at heart; mebbe both. You'll have one fine time makin' pet dogs outa them two. I advise yuh to hogtie 'em and put a muzzle on 'em before you go caressin' around them birds."

Bud's cheeks darkened with the hot blood of anger, for Butch lied. Those big, intelligent eyes staring with shy wistfulness from the head of the nearest black betrayed the slander.

"Thanks for the advice, Butch. When I need more, I'll send word over," he said coldly.

The Meadowlark boys almost stopped breathing for a moment, and sent swift, sidelong glances at one another. But nothing came of the incident, save a tenseness in the atmosphere, a guarded note in conversations that had before been carelessly friendly. Not until after supper, however, did Bud speak his mind to any one, and then it was to Gelle.

"I don't like the feel of this place, Jelly. We'll get out of here as soon as we can in the morning, and I wish you'd come with me while I turn over the money to Kid and get a bill of sale — and then I wish you'd slip the word to the boys that I'd like to have them keep out of the card games and turn in early.

"The Frying Pan thinks I'm young and green. I suppose they also think I'm a fool, and can't take the hints that have dropped around here. But it's like this, Jelly: We need this bunch of horses. I want that bill of sale signed to-night, and I want you to see me pay Kid the money.

Butch doesn't want to see me get those two blacks, and the whole bunch may be slightly damp." He grinned, and Gelle laughed softly. "But if we lose any horses on that account, Kid will have to settle with the Meadowlark; don't think he won't!

"And when we've got them safe home," he added, after a reflective pause, "I'll have Lark let the boys off for a few days. They can go spend their good money in Smoky Ford while you and I take a little scouting trip around. How does that strike you, Jelly?"

"Fine and dandy; betcher life!"

"So come on, now, while all the boys are in sight and it's still daylight, and we'll dig up the gold and get the paper signed that will make these *our* horses. One hundred and six head of them, at least. Nothing like being young and innocent, is there, Jelly?"

"No, there ain't," Gelle agreed soberly. "I never did have much use fer the Fryin' Pan, and that's the truth. Now Butch is with 'em, they don't stack up near so good. Come awn, let's git that gold money paid over to Kid before they steal it. That's how *I* trust this bunch!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BUD TAKES A TRAIL OF HIS OWN

Have you ever watched a herd of horses come streaming down a hill at the end of a hard day's travel? There's a thrill in it such as comes when soldiers are marching by. First a drifting haze which is the dust kicked up by the traveling herd; then the faint, muffled sound of hoof beats; the heads of the point riders seen dimly through the cloud, and after them the upflung heads of the leaders.

As the freshly branded horses sighted the delectable green of the Basin, smelled the river rushing out of the encircling wall of rugged hills, they came streaming down through the pass in sudden forgetfulness of the weary miles behind them. At the foot of the hill riders spurred out from the veil of dust, swinging closed loops and shouting, forcing the eager band close to the bluff and away from the alluring green of the meadows. Tired muscles tensed again. Heads went up, dusty nostrils belled and quivered with the mingled scents of the valley. The leg-weary colts,

dusty, lagging behind and then making sudden, shrill uproar when they missed their mothers, were sought with frantic whinnyings by the mares. Once found, they were torn from eager nuzzlings by the light thwacks of rope ends and the insistent, *"Hi! Hi-yee!"* from the hoarse throats of the tired riders; the cry that all day long without ceasing had dogged the laggards on the trail.

Even Maw left her endless pottering around the house and waddled down to the corral where Lark was already propping open the big gate, when Skookum came running with his body slanted perilously forward while he yelled that the horses were coming. Marge went back for her notebook and pencil, because you never know when cowboys are going to say something odd or picturesque, or a killing may take place — as she confided to her brother in passing.

(As a matter of fact, Marge was beginning to complain at the paucity of dramatic happenings on the ranch where she had confidently expected to find adventure galore. For however much the boys might boldly proclaim their gallant intentions, Marge saw them mostly at a distance and found them hopelessly shy when brought face to face with her. Young Bud talked with her gravely

and misleadingly upon occasion, wherefore she called Bud bashful and slow — when in reality Bud was anything else, and was mostly preoccupied with other matters. So the coming of the new horses loomed before her as an event that promised something in the way of Western color and, possibly, drama.)

With a last flurry of hard riding and hoarse shouts, the leaders swung away from the tempting meadows and inside the wing fence that slanted down from the corrals to the road, the precipitous bluff forming the other barrier. The herd galloped in mass formation to the very gate before they realized that here they faced another one of those hated periods of captivity. They swerved toward the bluff, hurtled back along it and met the implacable Meadowlark riders; milled briefly and thundered again down the throat of the wings toward the corral. With a flick of heels, a last surge of upflung dust, they dodged inside. The big gate slammed shut behind them and the chain was pulled around the great post that looked as though rats had gnawed it just there — the hook rattled into a heavy link and that particular horse deal was completed. The horses were safe at home and milling inside the corral just as they had circled round and

round within the Frying Pan enclosure that morning.

Six tired cowboys rode over to the open space beside the shed where saddles were kept, and with a backward swing of saddle-stiffened legs over the cantles they thankfully dismounted. A hot, windy ride — and the wind in their backs most of the way. Their throats were parched and raw from the dust and shouting.

"Me, I'm goin' to put sideboards on my chin, to-morra, and plug up my ears. That way I can hold more beer." This from Tony, who wished his world to know how dry he was.

"Yeah — if we git to go," Jack Rosen qualified pessimistically. "Lark may not let us off."

"Say, he'll let *me* off, if he has to fire me!" Bob Leverett threatened with a surface vehemence not meant to be taken too seriously.

"I'll see that you boys get a couple of days off, all right." Bud had ridden up and swung from the saddle, his face a gritty gray mask from riding point in the thick of the dust. "I'll fix it up with Lark this evening. Now's a good time to find out just what all this talk amounts to, and where it started. Of course, we think we know, but by the time you boys put a little gold into circulation, we ought to be dead sure we know.

All I ask is that you boys keep your ears open and let me know what you pick up."

"Nice bunch of horses, Bud." Lark walked over from the corral and stood among them. "I s'pose you boys are framin' a trip in to the Ford, about to-morra. Better not say anything to Lightfoot about goin'. He's just fool enough to be game for anything that comes up, but he can't ride with you bunch of hellions yet. I'd hate to tell him he can't go, so if you'll leave without hollerin' it all over the ranch it'll suit me just as well. I'll be over to the bunk house after a while; you can draw what money you want then."

"Now, ain't that hell?" cried Tony after an eloquent pause. "Here we been gittin' ready to appoint a committee to approach the throne — aw, shucks. Lark, yo're a good boss, in some ways, but you'd keep men on the payroll longer if you was kind to 'em!"

Since no man ever left the Meadowlark of his own free will, even the weariest puncher laughed at that, Lark with the others; but his eyes held a shadow as he walked toward the house with Bud.

"What do you think of my two blacks? Aren't they peaches?" For the first time Bud's tone betrayed the fact that the black bronchos were

not absorbing his full thought, but were being used to make conversation.

Lark grunted. They walked farther before he spoke.

" Horses are all right, I guess. Say, Bud, did you meet a feller ridin' a chunky little bay with the Acorn brand on its hip? He rode in here yesterday and stopped all night. Snoopy kinda cuss. Claimed to be a stock buyer, but he didn't show me no credentials, nor talk like he wanted to buy anything in p'ticular. Ast questions of everybody but me, seems like — mostly things that wasn't none of his business. He left right after dinner and said he was ridin' over Landusky way and would mebbe meet you boys somewheres on the trail. He didn't, hunh? "

" Never saw him at all, Lark. I don't see how we could have missed him, either, if he kept to the trail. How did you grade him, Lark? A detective? "

" Had the earmarks, son. Sicked onto us by some of them damn' granny-gossips in town, I take it. You goin' in with the boys to-morra? "

" No-o — well, I thought I'd take a ride around and see what sign I can pick up; on the quiet, Lark. I want to take Jelly with me, and I don't want the boys to know anything about it. They'll

proceed to tarry with the wine cup, the first thing they do, and what they don't know they can't let slip when their tongues loosen a bit. I hope they stir things up and keep the town interested enough so Jelly and I won't be missed."

"Purty late to pick up anything on the range, Bud. Seven days now, it's been. That alleged stock buyer said they ain't got the first clew yet. He might of lied, though. Prob'ly did. You goin' to take a look around Palmer's place?"

"I thought we would, if we get the chance. I want to let the boys ride in ahead of us. I want to use them for a decoy. I believe Palmer and his men will follow them in if they see a bunch of Meadowlark boys go riding into town. They'll want to see what's taking place, and guilty or innocent, I believe their mental reactions will send them after the boys."

"Mebbe." Lark lifted his hat while he pawed at his hair. "I never went into fizzyology much, so I can't say what reactions will do to a feller. If you say they'll act that way, I ain't goin' to contradict. But what's the rule fer perventin' a killin' if our boys run into Palmer whilst they're lit up? I got a nice bunch of boys, now, and I don't want to see 'em killed off ner sent to the pen."

"Oh, you work that out by the rule of subtraction," Bud grinned. "Have the boys leave their guns with the bartender when they take their first drink."

"Hunh? No, sir, I won't ast the boys to do what I wouldn't do m'self. I'd ruther leave my pants with the bartender! You musta got that idee in school. What's the use of havin' a gun, if you got to hand it over to some slick-haired bar-wiper just when it looks like you may want it? I'd go in myself, but"—he paused to glance over his shoulder—"I'm goin' to fix up the Nest again. My old dad would raise up in his grave if he knowed how things has been let run down that way. The Lookout needs some work on it too.

"You go on and carry out what's in yore mind, son. I'll buy in later on, if it's necessary. But you kin make this yore fight, for the present, and if things look like they're comin' to a head, you kin send one of the boys back after me. I'll be workin' here, puttin' things in shape fer a showdown. Once these things start, they's no tellin' where they'll wind up. Callin' us a hard outfit to monkey with is one thing—that's somethin' to be proud of. But when it comes to sayin' we killed a man so as to rob the bank where we do

our business — my Jonah, but that's damn' hard to swaller!"

"We aren't going to swallow it," Bud declared, promptly. "Where's Maw? I'm about half starved!"

Maw was coming, taking short, quick steps and waving the mosquitoes off with her apron. Behind her, Marge was walking with many short halts while she wrote something in her notebook, while whooping along in the rear came Skookum, driving Lightfoot and flailing him with a tall weed to keep him at a high gallop. Bud's eyes lingered on the bent head of Marge, and he loitered, waiting for her. Then, his glance going to the boy, his face hardened again with the purpose that filled his mind.

It was after he had eaten and Marge was waiting in the living room, hoping Bud would come in and talk to her after the deadly monotony of the past two days, that Bud artfully drew Skookum off by himself and turned the conversation very casually to Butch Cassidy. He wanted to know what it was that Butch had been talking about; but Skookum, unfortunately, had promised not to tell.

"Well, that's all right, pardner. If you promised, don't go back on your word; unless," he

added, "it was something mean. In that case, of course, I ought to know."

"It wasn't mean," said Skookum, after a pause for reflection. "If you asked questions like Butch did, I'd tell you more'n I told Butch. I — I didn't tell him any more than — than I had to. I — wouldn't told out on you that way, Bud. You're my — my pal."

Bud could have hugged the boy. There was a chance, then, that Butch had not learned much more than they all had heard in the bunk house. He did not see just what use Butch could make of the information gleaned in this manner, but he knew what he himself wanted to do. So Bud began to ask questions, and Skookum answered them as carefully and as completely as possible.

When he went to bed that night, Bud kept smiling in the dark until he fell asleep, and even then his lips were curved as if his dreams were pleasant. Skookum smiled also and dreamed of the pinto pony Bud had given him for his very own; a pony that was too small for a full-grown man; a pony with white eyelashes, one blue eye, a doglike devotion to any one who would pet him, and the unusual name of Huckleberry.

The satisfaction of Bud and Skookum must have continued through the night, for both were

up and out in the cool, dewy dawn when all the birds were ruffling feathers and puffing throats in rhapsodical melody.

Sooner than would seem humanly possible, Skookum went wading through dew-drenched meadows that straightway wet his feet, a frayed rope end dragging from the coil hung over his arm and in his two hands a battered basin holding oats enough to founder the pinto pony — or so Jake would have told him.

The pinto proved a willing partner to the new alliance, and let Skookum climb on his back and ride to the stable, obeying the guidance of a hand-slap on the neck, just as Bud had said he would. Picture any ranch-bred boy of eight or nine in full possession of a new and gentle pony, and you will have Skookum fully accounted for: riding reckless circles around and between Maw's flower beds to show her how Huckleberry neckreined; sending terror to the heart of a certain mother hen when he galloped full tilt and scattered her brood; roping gate posts, calves, old Jake, Lark — anything upon which a loop could settle. That was Skookum for the next few days.

As for young Bud, he was up and had a rope on one of the blacks before Skookum had so much as glimpsed the pinto pony. There was a certain

shady corral with running water and a pole rack for hay, called the bronch corral, where he meant to leave them until his return, but already he was bent on making friends with them. He heard the boys making hectic preparations for the trip to town, and thought they must certainly be faring forth to carry out plans carefully laid in many conferences; whereas no man save Bud had any plan at all. They meant to ride to Smoky Ford and put a stop to the slander against the Meadowlark — how, they did not know.

"Funny Lark wouldn't do something about it," Jake Biddle grumbled, when the boys were saddling after breakfast. "Ain't like the old days — not a damn' bit. Old Bill would 'a' rode into town with a gun in each hand and a booie knife in his teeth, hollerin' his opinion of sech damn' liars. The fellers that started it —"

"I shore wisht he'd of lived to show us how to cuss and hold a knife in our teeth at one and the same time," fleered Tony. "You old broken-down riders makes me tired. Think us boys is kids?"

"Yeah. Where'd you git the idee we're goin' to run home bawlin' fer Lark to come show us what t' do to them bad men that's sayin' mean things about us?" Bob Leverett turned a shade

redder. "Mebbe we ain't got the knack of carryin' a knife in our teeth whilst we cuss, but I betcha we can holler our opinions jest about as loud as old Bill ever done. And as fer wavin' a gun in both hands — why, me, I can look scarey enough with one gun to put Smoky Ford on the run. Come on, boys. We're keepin' Jake from settin' in the kitchen weepin' fer the days that is gone."

"Say, ain't Jelly goin' to town?" As they swung to the saddles Tony missed the tall rider. "Hey, Jelly!"

"You boys go awn," Gelle called from the far corral where he was killing time with Bud until the others were gone. "Bud and me'll be along after a while, mebbe. If we don't overtake you, you boys ride awn in and make yoreselves to home."

"Foolin' with them black bronchs," Rosen made indulgent comment. "Let 'em throw away good minutes if they ain't got better sense. Come on, let's be movin'."

They moved to such good purpose that presently a slow-settling dust cloud alone remained to tell of their haste.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE MEADOWLARK BOYS HAVE A PLAN

PALMER'S ranch, called so because the man himself came first to mind when one thought of his outfit — which bore the brand called the Roman Three — lay along the road from Meadowlark Basin to Smoky Ford. The fields lay farthest up river, but his house and stables stood in that narrower level where the river swung abruptly eastward toward the Indian Reservation and the hills. At that point the road drew in close to the house and not more than a long rifle-shot away from the river. Smoky Ford lay nearly seven miles farther down river; not a long ride for men accustomed to spend most of their waking hours in the saddle. Indeed, the Meadowlark boys thought of Palmer's ranch as being almost in the edge of town, and called their journey nearly done when they came loping up to the place.

"Let's wake the old devil up," Tony suggested recklessly, as they neared the gate and fired two shots into the Palmer roof-tree.

"Yeah! Let him know we ain't sneakin' past his door, scared he'll sick his dog on to us!" Jack Rosen lifted his gun and sent splinters flying from two shingles.

"Bet he don't keep no dog. Too darn stingy to feed one. Aye — Palmer! Yore roof's leaky!" Bob Leverett yelled, in a voice trained to carry across a restless herd, and splintered another shingle.

"The front door opened abruptly and Palmer himself stood briefly revealed to the four riders halted in the roadway just outside the big, closed gate. Palmer waved a rifle and yelled obscene epithets until Tony stopped that with a leaden pellet planted neatly between his feet. Palmer jumped, banged the door shut and took a shot at them through a window. Evidently he had no intention of killing in broad daylight, for he shot high.

"His loyal henchmen must be gone somewheres. T' town, mebbe," Tony surmised shrewdly. "The old devil could hit some one if he wanted to, but he knows damn' well we'd git him if he did, so he's jest expressin' his sentiments in a general way, same as we are. What say, boys? Shall we take him along with us to town?"

"Hell, what'd we want *him* for?" Jack

Rosen's voice was heavy with disgust. "He shore ain't good comp'ny."

"Oh, I jest thought mebbe we might take him along because he wouldn't want to go," Tony replied naïvely, slipping cartridges into his gun. "There goes that foolish jasper. Rest of 'em must be in town. Well, how about it?"

"Takin' him along would shore hurt my feelin's worse than it would his, fer I'd be in worse comp'ny than he would. What say we ride on in and see what's goin' on, and if the rest of these birds is there? If so, we can clean up on what's in town and come back out here later on. Mebbe Palmer'll foller us in. Be jest like him to have the law on us, don't you know it? I'm goin' to rip off another shingle and go about my business. I'm dry as a bleached bone."

They proceeded to rip off several shingles. But Palmer did not choose to retaliate, so they rode on, yelling derisively until they were out of hearing. Within a mile they had settled down and were tardily making plans calculated to stir Smoky Ford out of its lethargy and give it something to talk about. The idea was Tony's, and he was so proud of it that he could afford to give some credit to Bob as a true prophet when they topped a rise and had a glimpse of a horseman

just riding out of Palmer's gate. Palmer, following them in, no doubt meant to stir up trouble for them before he was through. Well, let him. Trouble was what the Meadowlark boys were looking for to-day.

"I can see now how he come to take a quirtin' from Lark," Mark Hanley said contemptuously. "He's yeller as mustard, without the bite. Jest the kind that would cave in a man's head when he wasn't lookin'. 'Twouldn't a took much nerve to shoot up the bunch of us, him in the house like that and us in the open. We got to git that old coot in a corner, somehow. Now, Tony, that idee of yourn—"

"It's a darn good idee," Tony defended hastily. "They could guess everything else and lay plans to block it, but they couldn't guess we'd pull off anything like that. First off, we better ride to Delkin's stable and put him wise. Our horses is our excuse for going there."

Stirrups tangled, they rode so close together. Often a man would break into laughter and glance back at the trail to see if Palmer was still following them. They trotted up to the very door of Delkin's stable, ducked heads and rode inside, where they dismounted and unsaddled without help or interference from the stable-man, who

knew them of old. When their horses were turned into the corral behind the barn, where they speedily found hay and water and a place to roll, the quartet went trooping back down the long floor, spurs jingling pleasant accompaniment to their low-voiced laughter. Slightly bowed in the legs, they were — or it may have been the permanent kink in their chaps. Twitching hats and neckerchiefs into becoming angles, lest the eye of some young woman catch them in disarray, they made for the screened door of the office, where Tony peered in, saw Delkin sitting gloomily before his desk, and pushed open the door, entering with a slight swagger.

"Oh, hello!" Delkin's eyes went from one to the other in apathetic greeting. "You boys in for a good time, eh?"

"Yeah. We just stopped by to let you in on the joke. Seen anything of Bat Johnson and the rest of the bunch from Palmer's?"

"Why, yes. They rode in an hour or so ago, I believe. They don't put up their horses when they come to town, you know. Post hay is cheaper." Delkin did not know just how much resentment was in his voice, but his mood was bitter these days.

"Well, how's the scandal comin' along, Mr.

Delkin?" Tony asked cheerfully. "Still shootin' off their mouths about the Meddalark?"

"Oh, about the same, I guess. But they'll never make me believe your outfit had anything to do with it." The mind of Delkin was so obsessed with the murder and robbery that it did not occur to him that scandal could focus on anything else.

"Well, we shore appreciate that, because we got a scheme for stirrin' up the bandits some. It's my idee," Tony informed him proudly. "I'd like to see what you think of it before we git to work on it. And mebbe it might be jest as well if you'd call in some of yore bank officers, so in case of a kick-back we won't git lynched without nobody to put in a word for us. That there," he added slightingly, "is Rosy's idee. He's scared to turn himself loose like he claims he kin, unless he's shore his imagination ain't goin' to be fatal. Rosy claims he's sech an eloquent cuss he's liable to git hung. Git the men that's handiest, will you? We're darn dry, and I can't hold these pelicans away from the flowin' bowl much longer."

Delkin glanced out through the open window, got up hurriedly and called to three men who were talking on a corner across the street. One threw up his hand to show that he heard, and they came

over, tapering off their conversation on the way. Inside, they looked at the four Meadowlark riders and nodded, turning inquiringly to Delkin afterwards.

"I called you in to hear something or other that these boys have framed. Don't know what it is, but it ought to work. You know the Meadowlark has the name of putting through what it starts."

"So I hope they're starting in the right direction," grinned Bradley, vice president of the bank and proprietor of the town's principal store. "I've been wondering if the Meadowlark was going to tuck its head under its wing, with all the talk going round about it. I overheard one of Palmer's men saying in the store that the bank has put a detective on Bud Larkin's trail. I wonder where he got that idea?" Bradley sat down and thrust out his long legs before him in the attitude of one who has the habit of taking his ease whenever possible. He knew the boys well. He could have told you exactly how much each man there had paid for the shirt he had on — though what his own profit had been would have been carefully guarded as a dark secret. Every mouthful of food that went down the throat of a Meadowlark man when at home came from

Bradley's store unless it had been produced on the ranch.

The other two men were also important business men of the town; one owned the hardware store and the other a small, fly-specked drug-store stocked mostly with patent nostrums. The boys could not have chosen four men more to their liking for this particular conference.

"Well, here's what we aim to do." Tony began rolling a cigarette as an aid to eloquence, and stated the plan.

The audience grunted and looked doubtful; then Delkin gave a short laugh.

"I admit it's original," he said dryly. "And it's lucky you told us beforehand, or you boys might find yourselves swinging from a limb somewhere before you could convince any one you were only joking."

"Only danger," Bradley agreed, "is making too big a success of it. We've been watching Palmer and his men pretty close, and I must say we haven't a thing to go on, except that Palmer was the last man in the bank before Charlie was killed, and Bat Johnson was the first man seen near the bank afterwards. On the other hand, Bud and that young stranger —"

"Say, Bud's name don't sound purty to me,

used that way; and that stranger's wearin' the Meddalark brand, Mr. Bradley," Tony interrupted meaningly. "Well, we're dry, and thank Gawd our duty calls us to git pickled or nearly so. And here," he added, glancing through the window, "comes the he-one of 'em all. Palmer's follered us in. Come awn, boys. Let's go git near-drunk. And, oh, say!" he added, reaching into his pocket, "here's the evidence agin us! Lark went and borried some money in Glasgow — I guess he told yuh himself — and us boys is plumb lousy with gold tens and twenties. So don't git nervous and think we're spendin' the bank's good money in righteous livin'. We worked fer this. Every dime was earnt in sweat and sorrow. Ain't that right, boys?"

"Damn' right that's right," they agreed solemnly.

"I'll tackle Bat," Tony announced, as they walked across the street to the Elkhorn, thumbs hooked inside their belts, hats atilt, eyes seeing everything. Lordy, how this town's growed since I seen it last! There's a new dog, layin' right on Bradley's steps. Wouldn't that jar yuh some, hunh?"

"Who's goin' to tackle Palmer?" Bob Leverett wanted to know. "Me, I wouldn't come

within ropin' distance of that old coyote. Rosy, you take 'im."

"Have to play the cards as they run," Tony warned them, pausing with one foot on the platform. "Make it look stagey, and my idee's plumb wrecked. Come awn in — like you hated to but had to. And we'll keep together right at first, hunh?"

"Shore. I wish't Jelly was here, and Bud." Bob cleared his throat, hitched up his belt and lounged in, the other three at his heels.

The four drank together, inviting the bartender to join them. Other occupants of the room may have noticed that they held their beer mugs in their left hands, and that they drank with their faces half turned to the room. Tony it was who paid in silver. They talked afterward among themselves in tones slightly lowered. Had they been men burdened with too much knowledge of evil, on guard against some overt move of an enemy, they would have worn that same air of aloofness, that faint challenge to the world hidden under the guise of careless ease. The dozen men lounging within knew without being told that the Meadowlark men were aware of the talk about them and felt themselves observed with suspicion. Indeed, every one must have seen how these four

watched the room in the mirror of the back bar, and how they studiously kept their right hands free and hovering near their belts.

It was the bad-man attitude, beautifully done. Had the Meadowlark boys murdered three men and robbed a dozen banks they could scarcely have been more careful. And they had the attention of every man there, thinly disguised, but all the keener for that. Bat Johnson, playing pool at the far end, lifted his lip in a sneer while he deliberately chalked his cue and raised a leg to rest it on the corner of the table for a difficult shot. But he did not make any audible remarks about the Meadowlark men, and he did pocket four balls in succession to show how steady were his nerves. In the back-bar mirror Tony saw that only two men were playing and that the game had just started. Bat would be occupied for the next half-hour, so there was plenty of time for certain necessary preliminaries.

Jack Rosen bought a bottle of whisky and paid for it with a ten-dollar gold piece. Bob Leverett watched the transaction and decided that he too wanted to drink out of a bottle and stop when he pleased. Bob fumbled in his pockets, looked uneasily over his shoulder and pushed a double eagle across the bar as if he were ashamed of hav-

ing it. Indeed, Tony gave him a frown of disapproval and a shake of the head, and this was not lost upon the bartender nor upon others who were covertly watching the quartet.

"Well, gimme a bottle too. It's cheaper that way." Mark Hanley also paid with gold, explaining behind his hand to the others that he just had to have change, and he guessed it was all right. And thereupon Tony borrowed the price of a bottle from Mark, and they went clanking out and across to the stable, leaving tongues tickling to talk behind their backs, and a thoughtful look on the face of Bat Johnson.

In the far corner of the corral Tony was carefully spilling whisky on his undershirt and emptying the remainder of the quart on the ground.

"This is a hell of a way to get a jag on," he mourned, "but we got to stay sober and act drunk. Keep 'er on the outside, boys, till we put over this play. Actin's an art, and you can't be too clear-headed fer the parts you got."

"Ah, gwan!" Jack Rosen pulled the cork from his bottle and took a long, rapturous sniff. "Only way to act drunk is to *git* drunk. Me, I always git a glassy look in my eyes, and my face gits redder 'n hell. I can't git that way by pourin' three drops on my shirt front like it was perfum-

ery. If I'm goin' to play drunken cowboy with no brains atall, I gotta put at least a pint under m' belt."

"Rosy, you *can't!* When you're drunk you wanta fight and beller out everything you know. We gotta play this thing fine." The anxious author of the idea snatched the bottle and broke it against the manger. "Say, you can git soused to the eyebrows when this play-actin's over. We'll *all* git drunker'n fools. Ain't that enough to make a man stay sober, if he's got to, in order to block their play? Come alive here, boys. We got a good chance t' make Palmer's gang show their hands. Do we go after 'em, or do we belly up to the bar and make hawgs of ourselves?"

"Oh, shut up! I'll bet yo're drunk before the rest is, Tony. No use addin' to our misery by chewin' the rag about it, is they?" Bob Leverett poured whisky into his palm and proceeded to wash his face with it. "Gawd, that's coolin'!" he exclaimed afterwards, licking his lips as far back as his tongue would reach. "Refreshin'est thing in the world! Betcha there ain't a feller in the outfit dast try it—wallop it all around your mouth without lettin' any go down. Betcha I'm the damnedest strong-minded cuss in the outfit!"

" Betcha five dollars," cried Mark Hanley, and swept off his hat to give his hair a whisky shampoo.

Jack Rosen washed face, neck, ears and hair, and saturated his handkerchief as a final flourish.

" By golly, that shore *is* refreshin'! " he testified earnestly, with his face lifted ecstatically to the hot wind. " Gimme some more. Tony went an' got fresh and busted mine. You owe me two bottles, don'tcha fergit that; one fer smashin' mine, and one fer misjudgin' yore betters."

They went swaggering through the barn and stopped at the office, where Delkin's three visitors still sat talking of the one big subject. The four leading citizens sniffed and leaned away.

" That's stage settin's," Tony informed them equably.

" Overdone," Bradley snorted, waving a hand before his face. " They'll think you fell into the barrel."

" Damned refreshin'," Bob told them soberly. " You fellers oughta try it in hot weather. You wouldn't never wash in nothin' else."

They backed out and went weaving across the street, arm in arm and stepping high. Apparently they were the drunkest punchers that ever spent money over a saloon bar, and their aloofness was

all forgotten. They entered the Elkhorn singing raucously a sentimental ditty which must never see print, and Jack Rosen on the outside of the group stopped and attempted to embrace Palmer in almost tearful joy at seeing him. The others pulled him along to the bar and Tony swung round upon the crowd.

"Everybody drink!" he shouted thickly. "Drown yore sorrers whilst we drown ours. Money's made to spend — come on, boys, an' let's squander some."

There is only one answer to that, in a saloon. Not a man in the place but had a convincing whiff of the reason why the boys from the Meadowlark had suddenly changed their tone. The curtain was up on Tony's play.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BUD FINDS THE STOLEN MONEY

"THERE goes old Palmer himself," Bud exclaimed with some eagerness, as he and Gelle rode out from behind a low hill and started down the long, straight stretch beside Palmer's field of grain, fenced and rippling a green sea of wheat heads. "Now as the rest of the bunch is out of the way, it will be smooth riding. You know your part, Jelly. You just ride up to the house and do whatever you damn please, so long as you hold the cook and Blinker and any of the other men who happen to be home, right there at the house. I hope they've followed the boys to town, though. It's the logical thing for them to do unless they're bigger cowards than I take them to be."

"Say, if you're goin' to sneak up to the stables, you'd better be drifting right now," Gelle told him. "If there's anybody down around the corrals, I'll have 'em up to the house before you need their absence very bad. Don't you worry about that, Bud."

"All right. I did intend to ride past the house

and come back the other way. It's just about as close. But this will do. Give me a few minutes' start, will you, Jelly?" Bud grinned, waved a hand in casual farewell and reined his sorrel out of the road and into the tangle of chokecherry bushes that grew in a shallow gully leading back toward the river.

Once away from Gelle, however, the grin left his face and a smoldering purpose glowed in his eyes. He was on enemy soil; if any of Palmer's men were at home and he were discovered he would probably find himself dodging leaden slugs before he got away. Midday was not the best hour for invading an unfriendly man's premises, but he had decided that it would be safer after all than midnight, when Palmer would be easily alarmed. Besides, the dogs were chained during the day and turned loose at dusk. Skookum had told him that: and for what he wanted to find he needed the broad sunlight.

Straight through the thicket he rode until he reached a barbed-wire fence extending up the river for a considerable distance. This, Skookum had told him, was the cow pasture which he would have to cross on foot, keeping one eye peeled for the big, black bull that had once killed a man and liked it so well he had been trying ever since to

repeat the performance. Bud tied the sorrel well out of sight, unbuckled his spurs and hung them on the saddle horn, hitched up his belt and pulled his gun forward, and crawled through the fence. Skookum had advised him to pass the house, hide his horse in the bushes and come back up the river, keeping in the willows on the bank. In that way he would run no risk of the bull, of which Skookum seemed to be in terror almost as great as his fear of his grandfather. This was shorter, however, and Bud remembered how terrible a cross bull can look to a small boy; to a man it is not so formidable.

This end of the pasture was brushy, full of the twitterings of bird families, the scurrying of small furred creatures. Blue-bodied flies poised humming just before his face; great, long-legged mosquitoes sang a whining chorus around him. He made his way quickly toward the river, where the bank rose abruptly in a worn sandstone ledge. The pasture gate was built close against the ledge, and it was this point that held most of the danger. Some one at the stables might see him — Skookum had told him that the gate was in sight of the stable, but that the ledge was mostly hidden by the trees. Bud guessed that he would be obliged to walk in the open for a few rods, but with Gelle

bullying the cook — or whatever it was he meant to do — even the dogs would have scant attention for any one moving down by the pasture gate.

Once, when Skookum had ventured into the pasture after a rabbit that had been caught in a trap and lamed, the black bull had come grumbling ominously from the bushes. Skookum had scrambled up the ledge out of reach of the bull and had waited so long in the shade of a jutting rock that he had gone to sleep. When he awoke the bull was gone, but his grandfather was coming in at the gate, which was almost as bad, so he had cowered down out of sight and waited for that threatening presence to pass. His grandfather had stood for two or three minutes looking back at the house, while he pretended to be fastening the gate behind him, and then he had walked on past where Skookum was hiding and had begun to climb the ledge.

"And — and I didn't tell Butch what — what I done after he — he climbed up on the ledge," Skookum had declared earnestly to Bud at this point. "I mean, I never told Butch about me sneakin' along after — after grandpa went back to — to the house, and lookin' to see what — what grandpa was doin'. So I — I found all his money

— but I never took any. I — I was scared!" Skookum was very careful to let Bud know what he had *not* told Butch, since he had promised Butch that he would not tell a soul the things he had revealed during the quizzing. Skookum believed in the letter of the law.

"I couldn't see grandpa after he climbed up on the ledge, because the — the rocks was in the way," he had explained further, and because he had told Bud so much more, Skookum was now in beatific possession of Huckleberry, the pinto pony.

"He's a smart kid. I suppose with the wrong training it would develop into foxiness like his grandfather. He sure described it perfectly," Bud made mental comment when, from a safe covert of wild currant bushes, he surveyed the ledge. He could even recognize the place where Skookum had scrambled up to get away from the bull, and the rock jutting out and away from the main outcropping where he had curled up and gone to sleep. From that point Skookum had drawn what he called a map, and crude though it was, Bud felt sure that he could find the place of which the boy had told him in a scared half-whisper.

He did one foolish thing. In crossing the open

strip of trampled grass just inside the gate he nearly stepped on a huge rattlesnake lying asleep in the hot sunshine. To pass so venomous a thing without killing it went contrary to all Bud's instincts and training. Rangemen reason that every rattlesnake left to crawl away may sink its poison fangs into the next unwary passer-by, and that death may be the result of some one's carelessness. Bud picked up a rock and sent it straight at the ugly head, following with other rocks to make absolutely sure of the job. When the snake was dispatched, he took long steps into the fringe of concealing bushes and climbed to the rock which Skookum had described so accurately.

At the house Frank Gelle was holding in his horse, that backed and circled restively, fighting the tight rein. Gelle himself was insisting loudly that Palmer had better come out or he'd go drag him out. No use hiding under the bed, he argued contemptuously. He wanted to talk to him a minute, and he would stay until he did talk to him, if he had to sit there 'til his horse starved to death.

"Boss ain't heah nohow!" Black Sam protested, rolling his eyes so that the whites showed all around. "You Meddalahk boys done plowed up ouah roof a'ready wif youah bullets, an' Boss he gwine on in to talk to Mist' Shu'f man. He

jes plumb *kain't* come out, 'cause he ain't heah. No, suh, ain't pawssible fo' him to come out, nohow."

"I think yo're lyin' to me, Snowball," Gelle declared firmly, and shook his head. "You gotta prove it."

"Lawsy, Boss, how Ah goin' to prove nothin' like dat air, 'cep'n' you git off'm dat hawse an' look fo' youahse'f? B-but 'twon't do no good nohow, Mist' Meddalahk, awnes, it won't! Dat ole house ain't got nobody into it *atall.* Ain't nobody undah no baid, Boss, Ah swah to goodness dey ain't. Blinkah, he's somewhah on de place, but he don' count no moah 'n Ah counts, an' Ah don' count nothin' *atall.*" Sam backed warily toward the kitchen door as Gelle pressed closer. "Blinkah, he ain't got no sense nohow, Mist' Meddalahk, an' A'm jes' an old black cook what doan' 'mount to nothin'. Boss, he's in town — leastwise he's awn de way — yessuh, yo'all kin ride awn aftuh him, Mist' Meddalahk, suh, an' tawk all you'm a mine to. Yessuh."

Sam was so scared, so plainly and honestly helpless, so anxious to placate the man he believed a dangerous foe, that Gelle hadn't the heart to bully him further. At the same time he must give Bud time in which to make a thorough search.

He looked around for Blinker, but that peculiar fellow was nowhere to be seen.

"Got any coffee?" Gelle demanded for want of something else to hold him there.

"Yessuh, Boss, Ah got whole pawt uh cawfee, yessuh, Mist' Meddalahk."

"All right, bring me a cup. No sugar, Snowball—"

"Lawsy, Boss, we doan' nevah have no sugah atall! Boss, he buy silk foah dishrags soon as evah he buy sugah foah cawfee an' sech." Sam grinned in spite of his terror, showing the strong, even teeth so characteristic of the negro race. "We got milk, 'cause milk doan' cos' nawthin'."

"How about buttermilk?" Gelle was better pleased with his task now. He thought he could keep this up for an hour if necessary.

"Yessuh, Boss, Ah jes' chuhned dis mawnin'. Buttah doan' cos' nawthin', neithah, an' it saves meat. An' aigs, we got aigs; hens, dey doan' deman' no wages, Mist' Meddalahk." Sam chuckled with a wry twist to his big mouth, as if the joke was barbed.

"What wages do you git, Snowball?" Gelle's tone indicated that he was prepared to be sympathetic.

"Me? What wages do Ah git? Ah doan' *git*.

No, suh, Boss, time Ah wuhks out de cos' of pants an' shuht an' shoes an' hat, Ah doan' *git!*"

"You don't?" Genuine surprise was in Gelle's voice. "Git out! Say, Snowball, slavery days is over, don't yuh know it? You don't have to work fer *no* man that's too damn' stingy to buy sugar fer coffee, an' runs a sandy like that on yuh fer pay. Judgin' by them garments yo're draped in now, Snowball, I'd say you must spend as much as five, ten dollars mebbe, a year on clothes. What wages does ole Palmer claim he pays you, if it's a fair question?"

"What wages? Wa' now, Mist' Meddalahk, Ah doan' rightly know, suh. Boss, he claim lak Ah eats moah 'n what Ah kin earn nohow, cookin'. He talk lak he pay me ten dollah, mebbe. Mist' Meddalahk, suh, Ah wuhk an' wuhk, an' mos' Ah kin do is eat an' sleep, an' nevah much of dat. Doan' seem pawssible to git ahaid mo'n one shuht."

Sam wiped a ragged sleeve across his perspiring face, turned and went into the house, his terror of the Meadowlark man erased from his simple soul by the note of human understanding and sympathy. He returned presently with a big tin cup full of cold buttermilk over which Gelle promptly bent his eager lips.

"Say, Snowball," he remarked, when he came up for air, "our cook at the Meddalark gits sixty dollars a month. And he *gits* it — and buys his own pants and shirts. You're bein' robbed and you don't know it. And say! Lark buys sugar, five sacks at a lick, and nobody gits the bad eye for dumpin' three or four spoonsful into his coffee. 'Tain't none of my business, Snowball, but I hate to see even a coon git the worst of it like that. Say, here's a dollar. Don't let ole Palmer ketch you with it though."

Sam's eyes would not stand out farther if he were being choked. He was too stunned by this munificence to put out his hand for the money, so Gelle tossed the dollar in his general direction, finished the buttermilk in one long drink, set the cup down on an upturned barrel near by and rode back to the gate to meet Bud, who was coming at a swift gallop. Bud pulled up, his eyes snapping with excitement.

"Go back around the corner of the fence, Jelly, and down the gully about fifty yards," he directed crisply. "I left that old man Blinker tied up, and I want you to stand guard over him until I can ride into town and back. He came up on me before I could get away in the brush, and all I could do was glom him and bring him out

with me. I won't be gone more than a couple of hours, but it's too hot a day to leave an old man tied up with ants and mosquitoes and flies raising merry hell with him. Will you do it, Jelly?"

"Sure, I'll do it. Thank Gawd fer that buttermilk! Say, you ain't leavin' me out of anything like a scrap, are yuh, Bud? If you are, I'll pack m' prisoner in under my arm but what I'll go to yore party."

"No — don't think there'll be a word of trouble. I'll be right back, Jelly, and then we'll both ride in and make merry. We'll have a right." He was galloping down the road before Gelle could answer him.

Even in his haste Bud took thought of the curiosity he would probably excite if he came pounding down the hill with his horse in a lather, and once on the subject of precautions it struck him forcibly that perhaps Smoky Ford would be just as well off if it failed to see him at all. At the foot of the hill, therefore, he turned sharply off the road on a dim trail that meandered up a wash and rounded an elbow of the bluffside, and so came out at the rear of Delkin's livery stable, where four Meadowlark horses took their ease in the corral, the sweat scarcely dried on their backs. The sight of them reminded Bud that after all he

had not been so far behind the boys who were probably still feeling the thrill of their first cold drinks. Indeed, they had not been gone on their odorous adventure more than ten minutes when Bud led his lathered sorrel into a shadowy stall and went burring his spur rowels down the long stable so lately echoing to the footsteps of those other Meadowlark riders. With considerable abruptness he pulled open the screen door and stepped into the office, his eyes flashing quick glances at the four men who sat there talking about the one big subject.

"Howdy. Glad to see you all here, because you're the men I came after, and I don't know just how quiet you want to keep this business. I've found your money — or the bank's money, rather. If you folks will ride out with me, I'll show you where it's cached. I went on a still hunt around Palmer's on my way in; saw he was headed for town, so I took advantage of his absence. His grandson, the one he abused so that Lark took him away, told me some things that gave a clew to the whole business. Palmer's gang came down river in a boat, hid under the bank and then took the loot back up river, and probably sunk the boat after they were through with it. That's the way I've doped it out, at least. At any

rate, I can show you the stuff, and you can bring it in; but you'll have to hurry. Unless you can get there, and the stuff is moved before Palmer goes home, he may discover us. And he'll be leaving probably —"

"No!" The front legs of Bradley's chair came to the floor with a thump. "My heavens, but you Meadowlark boys work fast when you get started! There's those young devils over in the Elkhorn, pulling off a bit of play-acting to make Palmer's gang give themselves away. And here *you* come, busting in here with the news —"

"No time for argument," snapped Delkin. "You men come along and bear witness to this. If we recover the bank's property, you have a right to be there, anyway. I think those boys over there will keep Palmer and his men interested for another hour or two, which will give us time. Bud, are you alone, or did your uncle come with you?"

"Lark's at home. I left Jelly on guard, back there; had to take that crazy old fellow at Palmer's and tie him up. He came and caught me at the cache, so there was nothing else to do. I wonder if I can borrow a fresh horse, Mr. Delkin?"

"By the lord Harry, you can have anything

I've got, down to my last shirt!" As the news took hold of his imagination, Delkin was like another man. He led the way into the stable and on to the corral, choosing mounts for his companions and shouting orders to the scurrying hostler.

Stauffer and Kline, the two other bank directors, ejaculated futile comments but failed to contribute anything further than their presence to the venture. There are always men of that type in any gathering. They have little to say, they never take the initiative, but they do add the force of numbers — a useful incident at times.

"Better tie on some saddlebags, or take a grain sack or two. You know that stuff is a bit bulky," Bud reminded them. "There must be twenty-five or thirty pounds of gold, besides the other currency and papers. I was in too much of a hurry to go over it, after I'd fully identified it as belonging to the bank. And we'd better go out the back way by the trail I came in on. Mr. Delkin, I suppose you know whether your man here needs a gag, or whether he can be trusted to keep his mouth shut."

"Say, you don't need to worry about no gag fer *me,* young feller," the stableman retorted indignantly. "If it's the bank money you're goin'

after, seven hundred and thirty dollars of it belongs t' *me!* I ain't liable to spill no beans off'n my own plate, I guess."

"You'd be a fool if you did," Bud laughed. "Well, we don't want a single solitary soul to know we've left town, or that I've been here. Mr. Delkin, are you ready?"

Five saddled horses, following five men who unconsciously held the reins in their left hands in preparation for any emergency, walked out of the doorway and into the hot sunlight that lay on the dim trail which joined the road at the foot of the grade.

The stableman stood with his back bowed in and his hands on his hips, teetering up and down on his toes, and watched them go, his jaws working in absent-minded industry on a tasteless quid of much-chewed tobacco.

"I golly, looks like I'll git m' money back, after all!" he cackled gloatingly, and followed the departing horsemen to the doorway, where he stood staring after them until not even their bobbing heads were longer visible as they trotted up the trail. When they were gone, he turned back grinning to his work.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"SOMETHING'S ABOUT DUE TO POP!"

"THIS seems a pretty tame proceeding," Bud observed whimsically, when they had dismounted in the hollow where Gelle was sitting cross-legged in the grass. "By rights there should be some shooting at the wind-up of a robbery the size of this one. I did take a prisoner, though, didn't I? But the old pelican doesn't seem to be very fierce — how'd you make out, Jelly?"

Gelle looked up sourly and pointed with his thumb. "I been keepin' the flies off your treasure trove, Bud, just as long as I'm agoin' to. If this is all they is to bandit-huntin', I'm goin' home and bug potatoes fer excitement. Where you goin' now? Snipe huntin'?"

"I'll watch this fellow," Kline the druggist offered promptly. "Give me a gun, somebody, in case he wakes up. Lord, that sun's hot!"

"Yeah, it's nice an' shady here — if shade's what you're after," Gelly told him dryly. "Bring any lunch baskets? Right nice, shady dell fer a buck picnic, and I could eat without bein' forced. And say, Bud, any time you feel like tellin' what

you found or expect to find, I'll be willin' to listen."

"Come along and I'll show you," Bud grinned. "Palmer's whole outfit's in town, Delkin says — excepting the cook. We're going to investigate a rat's nest down here by the river."

"Yeah?" Gelle looked from one to the other, and then grinned in slowly awakening amusement that spread to his eyes and left a twinkle there. "Judgin' from that praise-God look on these plutocrats' faces,— oh, well, come on!"

They filed down through the bushes after Bud, who led the way straight to the hedge and up over rocks that left no trace, to the place where Skookum had seen his grandfather at work like an old badger. A broken fragment of ledge lay piled there, and behind the rocks, hidden from sight until one climbed the pile and looked over, a dry, deep niche, narrow of mouth and roomy inside, lay revealed. Within it they saw a jumbled heap of sticks, dead leaves and twigs — a rat's nest, any chance observer would have sworn. But Bud picked up a larger branch and thrust away the litter. Delkin crowded past him eagerly and began clawing at the nearest of three ribbed, iron kegs with tight-fitting lids, such as are used for storing blasting powder.

"Gosh, is that money?" Gelle, peering over Delkin's shoulder, spoke in a hushed tone. "Gosh! Lemme heft one of them kegs, Mr. Delkin!"

His face red and sweaty with excitement, Delkin tilted the keg on its side, picked up a canvas sack as if it were very heavy and put it into Gelle's eager, outstretched hands. He laughed foolishly at the look of astonishment on the long cowpuncher's face and reached for another sack. He was like a boy clawing gifts out of his Christmas stocking and truly believing in Santa Claus. Bud, who had seen how despair could rack him, swallowed a lump that appeared mysteriously in his throat. It was worth a lot, he told himself, to see a man so overwhelmingly elated and happy.

"Brad, here are those bonds of Morgan's — why do thieves take stuff they never can use? Stauffer, here, you take charge of these — notes and mortgages, I guess they are. I wonder if Palmer was foxy enough to take out that note of his that the bank holds! God, if we could get Charlie's life back with the rest, I'd be the happiest man on earth! Well — that's all, I guess. No — but this isn't the bank's. This must belong to Palmer."

"Glom it!" Gelle advised grimly, but Delkin shook his head.

"No — all we want is our own. Well, no use putting back the rubbish, is there? If they come here at all, they're bound to find out the bank's property has disappeared. And if we have any luck at all, they'll never get back here. Jelly, do you want to carry the gold?"

"I should smile!" Gelle grinned widely to prove it as he held open the grain sack. "Any chances the gold might some of it rub off on m' shirt? How much is they, Mr. Delkin?"

"A little over twelve thousand dollars, according to the books. Brad's carrying three times as much; yes, Brad's got forty thousand dollars right there in his hands."

"Yeah?" Gelle cast a mildly disdainful glance at the package of bank notes which Bradley was stowing away in a bag. "Mebbe so, but it shore don't carry the same thrill as what this gold money packs. That why you left all that money in the keg?" He turned, shoulders slightly bent under his load, and stared at the emptied powder kegs, and at the one which was not empty. "It shore is a crime to leave all that good money there," he complained. "Chances are Palmer stole it, anyway. Me, I don't believe the old

hellion ever did get an honest dollar in his life. It'd burn his fingers."

"But that doesn't give us any right to it," Delkin told him firmly. "Some one is liable to come on a long lope to see how about it. You fellows go ahead; I'll bring up the rear. And remember, that open stretch down there is in plain sight of the stables, so you'd better take it on the trot."

Gelle did better than that; he sprinted for the bushes ahead of the other three, got hung up in the wire fence because he tried to crawl through without slipping the sack of coin to the ground, and so caught a barb fast in the canvas and had to be helped by Bud, who overtook him while he was still wriggling like an impaled bug.

Delkin, Bradley and Stauffer went on and were jubilating in hushed voices with Kline when the Meadowlark contingent arrived. They stood apart from the old man, who still snored comfortably with his lips puffed out through his thin whiskers. Bud's capture was likely to prove embarrassing.

"What'll we do?" Bradley asked impatiently. "Can't turn him loose here — and Kline says he's been asleep all this while, so he doesn't know yet we've come on to the scene. Jelly, can't you stay

right here and watch him for a while — till Bud comes back?"

Gelle stood with the sack of gold between his feet, as if he meant to protect it from all claimants, and stared glumly from one to the other.

"I can, yes. But I shore hate to like hell," he admitted sourly. "You'll go awn in an' have a scrap, chances are, an' I'll be settin' here like a knot on a log, watchin' this ole pelican's whiskers wave in and out. Excitin', ain't it? Damn fine way to spend an afternoon! When it comes to thinkin' up things fer me to do, you shore have got bright idees!"

"Seems to be about the only thing we can do about it, Jelly," Bud said soothingly. "We could tie him up, but even then it wouldn't be absolutely safe. You can't blame these bankers for not wanting to take a chance of losing all this money, now that they have it back. He might get loose and warn Palmer in some way. We'll go back by a roundabout way through the hills, just because they don't want a soul to know they've got the money. Once that's safe, we'll go after Palmer and his bunch, yes. But you must see, Jelly, that —"

"Oh, hell, go awn and leave me to m' thoughts!" Gelle pulled down the corners of his

mouth, stepped over the gold, turned back and gave it a kick as if he would show his familiarity with it, and grinned at Bud. "I never did have no luck, nohow." He lounged over and sat down beside the sleeper, and spat disgustedly into the lush grass near by. He waved them toward town, made a derisive gesture and started to roll a smoke, giving them no further attention.

"Jelly's a fine boy, all right, and it's a damned shame he has to stand guard — but I'm darned if I'm sorry enough for him to stay in his place," Bud observed with futile sympathy, when they were riding townward by devious trails which kept to the hills and concealed them from any passer-by on the road. "Still — are you dead sure Palmer's bunch will stay in town?"

Bradley laughed.

"The way Tony and the boys had it framed, Palmer's gang will give no heed to the passing hours. You know, of course, what the boys meant to do?"

"I didn't know they meant to do anything," Bud confessed. "Darn 'em, they must have held out on me."

"Well, now, if they don't get hung before we hit town, they may stir up something interesting. The idea was to play off drunk, and when the

crowd was pretty thoroughly worked up, seeing them spend money — gold money which they acted sneaking about — each one of the boys planned to get a Palmer man off in a corner, do the 'weeping-drunk' and confess that he went down river from Meadowlark Basin in a boat, killed Charlie and robbed the bank, and that he had the stuff cached and wanted a man he could trust to help him get the stuff safely out of the country. They had it planned out to the last detail: how long it ought to take them to get so drunk they'd confide in a man they never had chummed with, and just how they'd manage to lead up to the subject. Tony said he'd take Bat Johnson into his confidence, and Rosen was to tackle Palmer himself, I believe. Bob and Mark were going to buttonhole Ed White and the Mexican. It sure sounded like it might work — if they don't get lynched, as I said.

"They figure that one or all of Palmer's gang will get so uneasy there will be a general stampede to where the money's hidden to see if the Meadowlark boys have any of them found out where it's cached. Either that, or they'll give themselves away by wanting to fight or something. Of course," he added, glancing down with a grin at the bundle tied at the fork of his saddle, "they

didn't know we'd have the stuff safely put away long before they could trail any one to the spot where it was hid."

"And they expect to stay sober long enough to put that over?" Bud's lips tilted upwards with amusement.

"You bet they did! Just before you showed up, they'd poured whisky all over themselves, by the smell. On the outside," he added meaningly. "I don't see how they'd dare light a cigarette — they were sure saturated."

Bud touched his borrowed horse with the spurs.

"We'd better be riding," he called over his shoulder. "If I know anything about that bunch, something's about due to pop!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"JELLY" GETS IN ACTION

NOTHING is more disconcerting than to make elaborate plans which provide for every mishap save the one which afterwards looks absolutely inevitable. Tony had been deeply concerned over the integrity of his actors, and concentrated all his energies upon keeping himself and his fellow-actors sober, quite overlooking the obvious result of a meeting between Palmer's men and the Meadowlark boys. Tony should have remembered that a feud had existed since early spring; better still, he should have taken it for granted that the Palmer gang had circulated enough falsehoods just lately to render them self-conscious and a bit too ready to defend themselves if a Meadowlark man but looked their way.

Tony, absorbed in playing his part, was forced to take a drink or two at the bar — along with the three other members of his amateur comedy company — before he could plausibly detach himself from his fellows and wabble over to the pool table where he stood grinning a silly grin and

applauding Bat Johnson's mediocre game. Tony did not know it, but his eyes held an unfriendly, calculating gleam and they clung rather tenaciously to Bat; which was not exactly reassuring to a man with as much on his conscience as made Bat's slumbers uneasy and troubled with bad dreams. A man with that silly grin stretching his lips, while above the grin his eyes stare with a malevolent intentness, need wear no other sign to warn a sober man. Bat Johnson was not drunk.

"Y're a good man, Bat," Tony burbled, when Bat had reached up his cue and slid the last set of buttons toward the center. "W' played out y'r string, Bat — played out y'r string, ain't yuh?"

"What's that?" Bat whirled upon him. "What do you mean by that, you drunken four-flush?"

"Y'r a good — what'd you say? Four-flush? Me a four-flush — me?" Tony remembered to shake his head in drunken grief. "Bat, I — I never thought you'd shpeak t' me like that, I —"

"It ain't me that's played out my string," Bat told him viciously. "You wait till a few Meadowlark necks git twisted! A string er two's been played out there, my fine buckaroo. Folks is

gittin' damn' tired of them birds. You're one of 'em and you've about warbled yore last song. Git outa my way b'fore I kill yuh!"

Even the best actors may forget their parts when the proper cue is not given. Had Bat been friendly, or even neutral, Tony would have swallowed his feelings and gone ahead with his original lines. But you simply can't confide your guilt to a man like that, no matter what vital issue is at stake.

Still, Tony was vastly surprised at himself for knocking Bat head first over the pool table, because not even two unaccustomed drinks of whisky could convince him that this was a diplomatic opening to the confidential talk he had planned to have with Bat. He wondered dully whether he had spoiled the whole thing, or whether Bat would forgive the blow on account of Tony's irresponsible condition, and still consent to listen to the story which Tony had so carefully prepared to pour out at the urge of a drunken impulse.

But then Bat picked himself up and came at him with a billiard cue, and Tony decided quite suddenly that what he really wanted — and the only thing he wanted — was to show Bat exactly where to head in at (quoting Tony). He snatched

up a ball and laughed when he saw how it bounced off Bat's head, leaving Bat dazed and waving the cue vaguely until his head stopped spinning.

"Yeah — you better go git into yore boat and drift on down the river!" Tony chortled recklessly. "I don't reckon yuh had a billiard cue handy at the bank, did yuh? Had t' kill Charlie with yore gun. Think nobody's wise to you an' yore bunch, ay? Well, you and —"

A big, firm hand slipped over Tony's mouth and stopped him at that point, and the arm belonging to the hand seemed in a fair way of throttling him.

"You damn drunken fool," Bob hissed in his ear. "Think us boys all stayed sober jest fer the fun of seein' you drunk an' shootin' off yore mouth thataway?"

Jack Rosen jumped a card table and kicked over two chairs, but he landed on Bat Johnson in time to spoil his aim, so the shot went wild. Big Mark Hanley grabbed Tex and Ed White, a hand on each collar, and butted their heads together while he whooped his glee at the way things were going. Other men scattered when they saw these two clawing for their guns.

"Hey! I ain't got nobody t' lick!" wailed Tony, seeing how the other boys were occupied,

the whisky beginning to boil angrily in his blood. "Where's Palmer?"

No one seemed to know, or if they did they gave no sign. They made way for Tony's headlong rush for the door, where he saw that Palmer was already riding out of sight up the street. For a moment he was tempted to follow him; but time would be lost while he saddled his horse, and Palmer would have a start that would make it difficult to overtake him if he wanted to hurry. Moreover, sounds in the saloon behind him indicated that at least two fights were progressing with much vigor. Tony turned back to the fray and let Palmer go.

Had he ridden a bit faster Palmer would probably have seen Delkin and his party cross the road and turn into the hills on their way back to town with the bank's money. As it was, he rode at his usual racking trot and so arrived home not long after Gelle had taken his prisoner to the house and locked him in a room off the kitchen, where he promptly went to sleep again.

"Dass way Blinkah, he always do, Mist' Meddalahk, when Boss he go awn to town. Gittin' old, he is. Yass, suh, Blinkah he do need a pow'ful lot a slumbah. Wha' foh yo'all want wif dat ole cuss, skusin' de question?"

"Hell, I don't want him," Gelle denied pensively. "All I want is another drink of that buttermilk, and mebby a bite of somethin' to eat, Snowball. It's Bud that wants the old man. He come leadin' him along to where it was shady and cool, and then he told me I had to go and set with him fer company. I don't want him atall. I'm jest keepin' cases till I find out what Bud's idee was of havin' me day-herd the old coot. He ain't done a thing but sleep ever since I went on guard."

Sam grinned, showing an amazing lot of teeth.

"Yessuh, Mist' Meddalahk, he sho' kin sleep when chance comes along. Boss, he make a great ole niggah-drivah down Souf — yessuh, he sho' would do so! Ain' much sleepin' when Boss is home; nothin' but wuhk fo' ole Blinkah 'n' me.

"Ah sho' admire to git yo'all somethin' to eat, if Boss, he doan' come ketch me. Lawsy, Mist' Meddalahk, ef Boss, he come ridin' along home, Ah'd sho' 'preciate it ef yo'all lock up ole Sam jes' lak Blinkah. An' ef Boss, he s'picions Ah never made no desistunce, Ah'd lak lil small cut, mebby, on mah haid to show. Boss, he's pow'ful s'picious man, Mist' Meddalahk, yessuh."

"Say, the boys call me Jelly. Don't be so

darn formal, Snowball, or I'll likely give you a lump about the size of a goose egg to show. You set out the grub, and I'll mebby lock you up jest fer a josh. I dunno but what I like the idee."

Thus it happened that Gelle was sitting with his mouth full and his jaws working comfortably when Palmer rode up to the gate, leaned and unlatched it, sidled his horse through and closed the gate afterwards. Perhaps he noticed fresh horse tracks that were strange, though Gelle's horse stood tied in the bushes at the edge of the gully. Perhaps Palmer saw the imprint of Gelle's boots. Whatever the cause, he eyed the house as if he knew some danger lurked within — or perhaps he was merely estimating the amount of damage done to his shingles.

Gelle had not expected him back. He took up his glass of buttermilk and washed down the mouthful of bread and butter with one huge swallow, drew his hand hastily across his mouth and did a rapid mental calculation.

"Yo're my prisoner, Snowball," he said over his shoulder. "I might give you another dollar if you do a good job of playin' dead till I holler when. Go awn and take a nap with the old man while I talk to yore Boss."

From the yard a harsh voice called Sam, and

after a minute's hesitation Gelle motioned him forward.

"Act natural, Snowball, or I'll spill you all over the room," he muttered.

"Boss, he's pow'ful mean man. He kill dis ole niggah—" Sam held up his two shaking hands, the palms pinkish as if he had worn off the color.

"Gwan—answer him! He ain't goin' to have a chance at yuh. I want t' git him inside, Snowball. Gwan."

Palmer shouted again, and Sam caught up a chipped yellow bowl and stood forth bravely enough, though Gelle, standing just out of sight behind the door, could see how his legs were shaking.

"Yessuh, Boss, yessuh." Sam ducked his head propitiatingly.

"Sam, who's been here to the house? No lies, you damn' worthless black whelp!"

"Heah? To dis house? Ah dunno zackly, Boss, Ah-h—" He took another breath and plunged. "Sho'ht time aftah yo'all rode off, Boss, man he comes lopin' along. Wants to speak wid yo'all, 'cawdin' to what he says. Ah says yo'all ain't heah an' 'tain't pawssible he kin speak wid yo'all. He hang eroun' awn his hawse, but

he doan' shoot no gun, an' bimeby he ride awn off."

"Did, ay? Anybody you know?"

"No-suh, Boss, Ah doan' reckon Ah knows dat cowboy, nohow. But Ah notice, Boss, he's got Meddalahk brand on he's hawse—"

Palmer swore such fluent, heartfelt oaths that Gelle grinned and whispered to Sam that there was one thing old Palmer wasn't stingy with, and that was cuss words.

"Which way—here, come back here, you damn' lazy idiot, and tell me which way he went!"

"'Clah to goodness, Boss, Ah so plum tickled he's goin', Ah doan' rightly know! Awn up river som'ers, Boss." Sam rolled his eyes in terror, for Palmer was climbing down from his horse in the manner that promised blows delivered upon the first luckless object within reach.

"Scoot!" whispered Gelle, pointing toward the door of the small room beyond. Then remembering that the door was locked, he strode across on his toes, unlocked it and thrust Sam headfirst inside. He had just turned the key and faced the outside doorway when Palmer stepped in.

Surprise halted Palmer just an instant too long, for Gelle gave a long leap and landed a blow with his fist that rocked Palmer and brought both hands

up and away from his gun, vaguely attempting to ward off another blow that landed full on the nose. Tears of pain started to Palmer's eyes, but he fought back viciously and shouted for Sam.

"The coon's locked up," Gelle told him between clenched teeth. "'Twouldn't help yuh none to have him here. Leggo that gun! Damn yuh, I could have shot yuh down like a dog if I'd wanted to!"

Before he had finished, Gelle was tempted to regret his fair dealing. They swayed the full length of the kitchen, locked in each other's arms. Palmer managed to get him by the throat and beat his head against the wall until points of light whirled before Gelle's eyes. He tore loose, filled his lungs with one great gasp and tripped Palmer, who pulled the table over on top of them as he went down, clawing like fighting cats. Gelle got the edge of a board in the ribs and felt a sickening crack and after that the flaming agony of a splintered rib prodding tender flesh, but he hung tenaciously with knees and fingers and managed to stay on top.

The fight ended when Gelle snatched up the heavy earthen pitcher that had held buttermilk and had come through the upheaval without a crack. He swung the pitcher aloft by the handle

and brought it down on Palmer's head — breaking both. At least there was no doubt about the pitcher, and as for Palmer, he gave a convulsive shudder and went limp, and a cut on his head began to swell as the blood oozed out.

Gelle pulled himself up, grunting with the pain in his side, and looked down at the havoc he had wrought. He would have set the table back on its legs, but the effort was too painful, so he went staggering over to the bedroom door and unlocked Sam, bringing him out with an imperative, beckoning gesture, Palmer's gun in his hand. Sam came as if he were being kicked out, with his back bowed in and his fingers spread ready to ward off a blow.

"Get a rope or something to tie him up," Gelle ordered sharply. "I ain't goin' to hurt you, Snowball — not if you behave. That'll do. Pull his hands around behind him — no, he ain't dead. He'll come to after a while. Get a wiggle on."

"Yessuh, yessuh, Mist' Meddalahk."

"All right — fine. Now, jest drag him in there, will you, Snowball? And lock the door; or, no, jest drag him in there. The darn cuss might take a notion to die on my hands, and I want him alive; so you can keep an eye on him.

When he comes to himself, I wanta talk to him."

"Yessuh, Mist' Meddalahk, yo'all sho' am a hahd man to git shet of bein' talked to!" Now that Palmer was safely tied, Sam could afford to take a full breath and to grin once more at his new friend. "When yo'all say you wanta talk wif a man, 'tain't no use to avoid de cawnvusashum — 'tain't no mannah of use atall. Might as well make de bes' of it an' *talk*. Yessuh, Mist' Meddalahk, yo'all sho' am detumined!"

Gelle laughed, but that did not cause him to relax his watchfulness.

"What about the men that work here, Snowball? Purty good friends of yourn, ain't they?"

"Friends uh mine? Bat 'n' dat ah Mex, 'n' Ed friends uh *mine?* No, suh, Mist' Meddalahk, dey ain't no friends ob nobody but deyselfs. Dem fellahs, dey so plum mean an' awnery, dey jes' about hate deyselfs mos' awl de time. No, suh, Ah ain't got no friends — not on dis heah ranch, Ah ain'. Cusses an' kicks, dat 'bout awl Ah evah gits aroun' heah."

"Oh, all right. I just wondered, because if they come lopin' home, I'm liable to need more rope. Snowball —"

"Yessuh, yessuh, Ah gits moah rope direckly, Mist' Meddalahk. Lawsy, how dem fellahs do

lie to dis heah ole niggah 'bout you gemman at de Meddalahk! Yessuh, dey sho' do lie!"

"Got anything to bandage a broken rib?"

Sam gave him a startled roll of eyeballs and hurried out. Gelle heard him clumping around overhead for a few minutes and wondered what he was up to. But when Sam came down he had a sheet, yellowed and smelling a bit musty; and over his arm was hung a coil of cotton clothesline.

"Onlies' sheet in de house was up in de lof'. Big trunk awl wrop up wid dis heah rope. Mist' Meddalahk, suh, Ah mighty sorry yo'all done bruk a rib, kase mo' fightin' sho' is boun' t' come along when dem three gits heah, an' ole Sam, he ain' no good nohow."

"You can tie 'em up if I can get 'em into the house and pull down on 'em with my gun. Purty tame way to git 'em, but I guess it'll be best to play safe. How soon you reckon they're liable to come?"

But Sam, of course, did not know. All they could do was wait and hope for action before dark. There was, Gelle knew upon reflection, small chances that the three Palmer men would be left to ride unhindered out of Smoky Ford, once Delkin's party arrived. Palmer they had

of course missed on the way, but unless his men left soon after he did, they would be captured and held in town until the sheriff could come and get them. It was just a bit of good luck that had sent Palmer into his hands.

And then, not more than half an hour after they had finished their preparations and time was beginning to drag, a scattered fusillade of shots came crackling thinly from the pasture, down near the ledge.

Gelle got up too carelessly and was obliged to sit down again, white and sweating. Sam was goggling at him as if in Gelle's face he could read the explanation of the sounds.

"Our boys chased 'em out, mebbe," Gelle muttered, speaking in that repressed tone which comes of not being able to take a deep breath. "Still —I dunno. Gee, I'd love to be down there! All I git outa this deal is sittin' around whilst the rest plays. Listen at 'em, Snowball! Darn the luck, anyway!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"WHO SHOT BAT AND ED WHITE"

LIFE would sometimes be simpler if events were more evenly spaced and periods of inaction put to a better use by letting them hold the incidents that otherwise must pile on top of one another and crowd one day overfull of excitement. But so long as we remain unscientific enough to take things just as they come and let our emotions rule our hands and feet, life will continue to go steady by jerks.

Take this day in Smoky Ford and at the Palmer ranch, just seven miles out yet well within the trouble zone. If there is anything in thought vibrations, Tony and Bud must have owned powerful mental dynamos and set them working full speed that morning. The pity is that they did not work altogether in harmony, but instead set up different currents of violent thought action — and most of the mental activity gyrated around that money looted from the bank.

The money itself was safe enough, once it reached Delkin's stable. Delkin was a shrewd man when sudden misfortune did not upset him,

and his method of safeguarding the bank's property was truly ingenious.

Among his horses was one with the significant name, The Butcher. His character lived up to his name, and with the exception of the stableman and Delkin himself, not a man in Smoky Ford would venture within reach of his teeth or his heels — and both had an amazing reach, by the way. Delkin studied long and deeply over the safest place — barring the bank — for the money and papers, and his cogitations brought him finally to The Butcher. The bank, he considered, was out of the question for the present. Some one would be sure to see them carrying the stuff inside, and the news would spread like scandal. Until Palmer's gang was safe behind the bars, it must be taken for granted that the money was still missing.

This naturally left Delkin thinking of The Butcher, and the more he thought of him the easier he felt in his mind. The Butcher had his own little corral for exercise, his own box stall. Moreover, the manger was built high and had a false bottom nearly two feet from the floor. Who in Smoky Ford would ever dream of finding anything in The Butcher's box stall, even if they dared look there?

Delkin did not say a word until they reached the stable and he had sent the stableman up into the office to watch for chance callers. The Butcher was out in the corral, and Delkin closed the stall door to make sure that the horse would stay outside for a while. Even then he took only Bradley into his confidence, after the others had gone to see what was doing in the saloons and whether the Palmer men were still in town, and what the Meadowlark boys had gained by confession. Not even Bud suspected Delkin of having a secret, but supposed that the money would be kept in the office until it could be transferred to the bank vault.

Instead, the two men carried it into the box stall, pried up a board in the manger and dropped everything underneath, replaced the board and the hay in the manger and heaved sighs of relief. Then Delkin waved Bradley out of the stall, opened the outer door and called The Butcher in. He came, nickering softly for a lump of sugar, got it and nibbled daintily while Delkin slipped out and shut the door. It was a bit early to shut up The Butcher, but the stableman would not bother with him unless he had to; Delkin knew that.

"There! We needn't worry about anybody

stealing it to-night," grinned Delkin. "Unless the stable gets afire we're dead safe, Brad. We can leave it right here until we are ready to open up the bank again. Now, let's get after Palmer and his gang."

They met Bud coming with four much-ruffled Meadowlarks, a small, rat-eyed Mexican hustled along in their midst. Bud's eyes were once more snapping with excitement, the others inclined to glassy stares through red and swollen lids.

"Here's the one they call Mex. Took two knives off him, and the boys got a gun. Haven't located Palmer and Bat yet," Bud announced, as the two bankers hurried toward them.

"Aw, they crawled off t' die som'ers!" Tony pompously declared. "We licked 'em to a fare-ye-well. Didn't we lick 'em, boys?"

"Shore enough did," Mark Hanley boasted. "Put 'em both awn the run. One of 'em chawed m' ear off, purty near, but I got 'im."

"Sh'd say we licked 'em!" big Bob boasted. "Now I'm goin' to git drunk."

"Yes, y' betcha!" Jack Rosen approved gravely.

"Betcha they know now who the thieves is an' who the murderers is," Tony cried exultantly. "Told 'em m'self. Called the turn on that boat

— made 'em swaller twice, that did! Told 'em I could put m' hands awn —"

"Good Lord!" Bud gave Delkin and Bradley a quick look that had in it a good deal of consternation. "They'll beat it out of the country now. Gone for the loot, and they won't stop short of the Badlands. Tony, you damn' chump, why didn't you keep your face closed?"

"Why? Had t' open it, didn't I, t' swaller a drink er two? Me, I don't drink only with m' eyes, I tell you those! Had t' open m' mouth, anyway — thought I might as well use it. Wha's matter with that? They *are* thieves an' murderers, ain't they? Told 'em so — licked 'em to a frazzle. Didn't we, boys?"

"Damn' right," three voices growled in chorus.

"Palmer, he run out on us, 'r we'd licked him too. This Mex, here, he's licked. Howled like a pup. Didn't you, Mex?" Tony turned gravely to the cringing captive, who nodden sullen surrender.

"Well, get your horses," Bud snapped. "You've got some riding to do now, you're so darn gay and festive. How long have they been gone? Do you know?"

They thought they knew exactly, but their answers were so conflicting that Bud and Delkin

finally took the word of a boy who volunteered the information that Bat and Ed White had ridden out of town about ten minutes ago, headed toward home.

"We'll have to fan the breeze, boys, and we may wind up in the Badlands. Mr. Bradley, we'd better take a little grub — sardines and crackers, or something like that. Because if we don't overhaul them at the ranch, we'll just keep on going."

"I'll bring some stuff to the stable," said Bradley, and started on a trot to the store.

"Oh, hell, and we don't get drunk at all!" Big Bob Leverett complained disgustedly. "Wish I had the whisky I washed m' face in. A hull quart of Metropole gone t' granny!"

Bud whirled on the group and stared angrily from one to the other.

"You're drunk enough," he said contemptuously. "You fellows seem to think this is just a picnic. Do you want me to round up a posse here in Smoky Ford, and tell them that we've got the goods on the gang that killed Charlie and robbed the bank and that we're going after them, but our own men are too drunk to be of any use? I can take a town bunch, if you say so, and let you boys stay here and swill whisky. It would be a

consistent finish to the damage you've done already — telling the gang that we're wise to them, rough-housing awhile like any other drunken chumps, and then letting them all get off except this greaser who may not know a thing about it." His lip curled in a sneer. "A hell of an outfit you are to round up outlaws!"

"Gwan an' git your Smoky Ford posse if you want to, Bud," Tony said stiffly, the whisky fumes swept clean from his brain by the hurt Bud had given. "While you're gittin' them, we'll hit the trail. Come awn, boys."

They took the remaining distance in a run, and they were saddled and ducking under the stable doorway and racing off up the road and out of town while Bud was still waiting for Bradley to come with supplies, and Delkin was telephoning the sheriff to come as quick as the Lord would let him. Smoky Ford itself saw only that the Meadowlark boys were in town raising Cain again, never dreaming that their one big tragedy of the summer was reaching a fortuitous climax, under the guise of a drunken fight in a saloon.

The Mexican, dropped unceremoniously when the boys ran for their horses, would have ducked out of sight completely if Bud had not seen his first furtive sidling and caught him by the collar.

Him they turned over to the stableman for safe keeping. He would be kept safe, because the stableman hated any man not of his own race, as is the way of certain cramped souls.

"Now, we'll have to fan it," Bud cried impatiently, "before those drunken punchers of ours do some other fool thing. How soon will the sheriff get here, Mr. Delkin?"

"Wel-l, it's about four-thirty now — little more. Oughta make it by ten or eleven. I was lucky to catch him in the office. Just got in off a wild goose chase down river, he said. I told him if we aren't here or at Palmer's, he better pick up our trail there. Didn't mention getting the money back — too darn many mule-ears on the line. Didn't say anything definite, only I needed him right away, and he'd find me out at Palmer's or somewhere beyond. He'll come on a long lope. And say, Bud, the way the boys shot out the door and took off up the road, I don't believe they were so darn drunk after all!"

"Why?" The harsh judgment of youth still held Bud's reason in thrall. "Think it takes brains to stay on a horse? I never saw our boys too drunk to ride, Mr. Delkin. It's all right — if they take it out in riding and don't attempt to *think.*"

Unconsciously Bud maligned those four. They weren't so far from being sober, once they were out of the atmosphere of the saloon and pelting up the road in the cooling breeze of late afternoon. In spite of Bud's opinion of their mental condition, the four were beginning to think.

"Know what old Palmer done?" Bob Leverett, soberest of the four, half turned in the saddle to face the others as they raced along. "Went after the dough they took from the bank. I'd bet money on it. He heard them cracks you made to Bat about the boat, Tony. That's about when he beat it. Great friend, ain't he? Quit his men cold at the first word you let drop. Betcha he's got the money and gone with it."

"Betcha we ain't fur behind 'im," Tony flashed back. "Bud, he makes me sore! Tell you right now, I don't like the way he rares up an' gives us this high-schoolin' talk when things don't go jest to suit his idees. Hell, I punched cows before Bud was big enough t' keep his own nose clean! Drunk! Huh!"

"Bud, he's a good kid enough, but he's *just* a kid," Mark Hanley opined. "Swell-headed; knows it all; thinks a little schoolin' gives him a license t' ride herd on us boys like we was yearlin's turned out in the spring. C'm awn — mebbe

we kin round up the bunch 'fore he gits there. Learn 'im a little somethin', mebbe."

"Well, I don't want to make any brash statements," said Rosen, "but I betcha Bud, he'll wish 't he'd trailed with our party, 'stead of his own, 'fore he's through. We got 'em runnin' for the boodle, and now we'll fog along behind and glom em jest about the time they git it."

Bob Leverett nodded and pricked his horse with the spurs, and the others lunged ahead to keep pace with him. They were yet some distance from the house when they heard the distant pop of gunshots — the unmistakable *pow-w* of a .45 fired several times in quick succession, or else one or two shots from several guns. And, riding hard to the gate, they were not too late to see the telltale blue haze down by the pasture gate to show where the shooting had taken place.

Bob, in the lead, opened the gate and let it swing wide to where the weight sagged it down so that it dropped against a rock and remained there. The three pounded through and took his dust to the stable and beyond, passing the house without a glance toward it.

"It's dem Meddalahks dat shot shingles off ouah roof, suh," Sam called excitedly to Gelle, who was standing in the kitchen door with his

six-shooter in his hand and a longing look in his eyes. "Now moah shootin' takes place direckly, Mist' Meddalahk. Yessuh, dey shuah can shoot!"

"My luck — always settin' around in the shade watchin' the rest of the bunch have all the fun!" Gelle turned back, walked very circumspectly to the bedroom door, turned the knob and looked in. "Yore boss is showin' signs of life, Snowball. Guess I better camp here, seein' he's the old he-one of the bunch. Tell you what you do, Snowball. You go down there and tell the boys Jelly's here with a rib broke into a thousand pieces, an' old Palmer's hog-tied; so I can't leave, nohow. Will you do that?"

"Ah — Ah do anything awn uth fer yo'all, Mist' Meddalahk. Ah — ef dey all shoots ole Sam, Ah wish yo'all 'd kinely keep dis heah dollah fo' tokum ob ma gratefulness, Mist' Meddalahk, suh."

Gelle took the dollar, looked queerly at Sam and gave it back. He took what was left of the sheet, thrust it into the negro's shaking hands and grinned reassuringly.

"You wave that, Snowball, and they won't shoot. I'm kinda afraid they might go out the other way, up along the field to the road. You

ketch 'em, Snowball, and I'll give you another dollar when you bring 'em back. Tell 'em what I said — I got Palmer hog-tied, but my rib is stickin' through my liver er somethin' like that, so I can't fan down there. Gwan."

Sam went, waving the torn sheet every step of the way; a brave thing to do, considering how scared he was. And Gelle, watching anxiously from the doorway, wondered why the shooting did not begin again, now that his fellows were at hand. For that matter, since it was not the Meadowlark boys who had started the gun-fighting in the pasture, down by the ledge, who was it? He had Palmer safe, and so far as he knew, Bat Johnson and the others had not returned from town. Certainly they had not passed the house, or Sam would have seen them. Yet they must have left town, or the Meadowlark boys would not be here.

"If I don't find out how about it right pronto, I'll bust!" Gelle complained to a lean cat that came walking up the path with a chipmunk in its mouth,— earning its board, Gelle thought irrelevantly while he waited, sight and hearing strained to catch some indication of what was going on down there. It was too quiet. Gelle did not like it at all.

And then from the road to town came the

pluckety-pluckety tattoo of galloping horses, and Bud, Delkin and Bradley swerved without checking their pace and came racing through the gateway; saw Gelle standing in the doorway and reined closer to the house. Bud's horse stopped in two stiff-legged jumps within ten feet of Gelle.

"It's down in the pasture, whatever's goin' on," Gelle called, without waiting to be asked. "I got Palmer tied up in here — the boys went foggin' past — there was some shootin', but it quit before they got there. For the Lord sake, go bring me some news!"

At that moment the boys came loping around the end of the stable, riding loose and in no great hurry.

"Show's over," Tony bellowed, with possibly a shade of mean triumph in his voice — for Bud's benefit. "Bat and Ed, they're down there in the pasture deader'n last year. That Mex and ole Palmer's about all there is left to hang, and we glommed the Mex and Jelly's got Palmer. Bud, you might as well gwan home. Us boys have wound things up for yuh."

"Yes? Did you get the money back?" Bud was young enough and human enough to take that fling at them.

"Oh, no-o — but that's a mere deetail. We

ain't come to that yet." Tony's manner was still charged with triumph.

"Say, who shot Bat an' Ed White?" Gelle's mind pounced upon the one puzzling point in the affair. "You fellers didn't. There wasn't a shot fired after you boys passed the house."

"Why — we figured they shot each other. Bat's gun was still smokin' when we got there, and Ed's gun was warm. Bat had fired three shots and Ed White two —"

"Yeah? Who fired them other four or five shots? I counted nine er ten, I wasn't shore which. How many 'd you hear, Snowball?"

Sam had just arrived, puffing from haste and excitement.

"Jes' what yo'all heah, Mist' Meddalahk, yessuh. Me, Ah doan' count good nohow, but Ah's shuah Ah huhd shootin' lak dey nevah would run outa bullits. Ah counts mighty slow, but Ah huhd jes' as many as what yo'all huhd."

"Sounded like more than five to me," Bob Leverett declared, now that the subject was opened. "More like about four guns in action than two; three, anyway. Reckon there's more in the gang that we don't know about?"

"That," said Delkin, "is what we must find out."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"BUD AND JELLY; ONE OR BOTH"

With two of the boys — Mark Hanley and Bob Leverett — on guard over the bodies of Bat Johnson and Ed White, the remainder of the party returned to the house in a thoughtful mood. Certain small details puzzled them, and Bud appeared to be the most worried man among them, though he did not say much. What he did do was give Gelle a meaning glance and tilt of the head when no one was looking, and then stroll out to the well some distance away and down hill at that — too many ranchers seeming to believe that the cook needed exercise. In a couple of minutes Gelle came walking circumspectly down the slope, his face twisted with pain of moving.

"What's eatin' on yuh, Bud? Thought I told yuh I got about four inches of rib wound around my backbone," he complained, as he came up.

Bud's eyes were somber as on the day of the bank tragedy, and he gave no sign of sympathy — proof of how worried he was.

"Jelly, there's going to be a kick-back in this

thing if we aren't mighty careful. Bradley and Delkin are wondering right now how polite they can be about Palmer's money being gone. Are you sure he came straight here to the house from town?"

"Yeah, I saw him ride up to the gate and open it and ride in. I wish now I'd throwed down on the ole coot before he got into the house. I'd 'a' saved me a busted rib. But I was scared maybe the rest was right behind him, Bud, an' I wanted to git 'em all. Gittin' Palmer inside the house, what I done to him wouldn't be publick. That's what comes of bein' a hawg," he added grimly. Then he came back to the meat of Bud's question. "Why, Bud, is Palmer's cash missin'?"

"Yes, and Bat Johnson and Ed White were dead before they reached the ledge. They didn't have any money to speak of; a little chicken feed in their pants pockets was all. Our boys don't know where the stuff was hidden, and I went with Delkin and the others to town and came back with them. So you see, Jelly—"

"Yeah, I see, all right." Gelle's eyes went cold as they bored into Bud's mind. "Well, what d' you think about it yourself, Bud?"

"I?" Bud looked at him straight. "Whatever you say, Jelly, goes with me."

Gelle stared longer, exhaled a long breath and relaxed to a mirthless grin.

"I oughta lick you, Bud, fer needin' my word. But friendship wabbles when there's money in sight, so — I never went near the damn' place after I packed that back-load of gold away from it. You was behind me — behind us all, fer that matter." Gelle's sudden grin turned a little sardonic. "Still, whatever you say goes with me! I kin be as good a friend as you kin, Bud."

Bud had to laugh, though he felt little enough like it.

"You win, Jelly. I'd have had to do some quick work, but I suppose it would have been humanly possibly for me to duck back up the ledge, grab Palmer's money and come along with it until I saw a place to ditch it where I could come back after it. Fast work — but I did stand in the fringe of the trees by the ledge and watch the stables here until you fellows were out of sight. I wanted to make darn sure you weren't seen.

"Well, I didn't go back either. But the fact remains that the cache is cleaned out — in a hurry, by the look of things around there. And these two dead men dropped in the open, just in-

side the gate and before they had been to the ledge. For one thing, Jelly, our boys weren't so very far behind them, so Bat and Ed wouldn't have had time to get the stuff, hide it somewhere else and then get into a fight over it and kill each other off before our boys came. They'd have had to do faster work than I would to have raided the cave while you fellows crossed the open down there."

"And awn the other hand, you fellers rode off and left me in easy walkin' distance of the money, and the old man sound asleep and snorin'." Gelle reasoned it out soberly, stating the evidence against himself quite as impartially as Bud had done in his own case. "Yea, I'm the pelican, too, that told Delkin to grab the works. Looks like I'm bogged, right now, and sinkin' fast. Bud, on the face of it, you an' me both is guilty as hell. Ain't we?"

"On the face of it, yes." Bud studied the evidence while he finished rolling a cigarette. "Of course, we can't tell yet just how it will affect the case against Palmer. Not at all, maybe. That's something we have nothing to do with. I wanted you to know the money Delkin left in the cache was gone — how much, none of us know, of course. It's mighty mysterious, don't you think? Say,

Jelly, what about those shots? Are you dead certain you heard more than five?"

"Shore I am. But I couldn't prove it, Bud — not in a thousand years. Snowball, his word ain't no good, so there y' are. I believe in my heart that somebody else was after that boodle and Bat and Ed White, they run into 'em, goin' after it theirselves. But that ain't proof. Say, Bud, d' you s'pose Butch Cassidy rode over on the quiet —"

"I've been thinking of Butch. He's that stripe, and so is the rest of the Frying Pan outfit in my opinion. But as you say, Jelly, opinions aren't proof. Besides, Skookum says he didn't tell Butch where his grandfather had his money hidden. I'll take the kid's word. He wouldn't lie — not to me, or any one he likes. Butch tried to pump him, all right, but Skookum says he didn't tell Butch anything much that we didn't hear in the cook house."

"Did the kid say what ole Palmer's money was — gold or paper or whatever?"

"He said he saw a lot of gold money in a sack. You were looking over Delkin's shoulder, Jelly. What did it look like to you?"

"Gold. Jest about what the old thief would take and hide, Bud. Prob'ly most of it was stole,

and bills has got numbers on. Then again, gold ain't spoilable. What you laughin' at, Bud? "

"At us, Jelly. Delkin certainly must know Palmer's money was in gold. And Lark's loaded up with gold coin —"

"So we got our alibi right there, Bud. Fur's that goes, the Fryin' Pan's got some honest gold money."

"And there is *their* alibi. And Delkin is sure to consider Lark's gold as an out for us, just as we can believe that Butch would account for any gold he flashed."

"Can't we ketch 'im? Why don't you take out after 'em an' see if you can't pick up their trail? Gosh, Bud, if the money's gone, you 'n' me *knows* Butch musta glommed it. I'd go, only fer this damn' rib."

"Better have one of the boys hitch up a rig and take you into town, Jelly. Old Doc Grimes isn't much force, but he ought to be able to fix you up all right. I'll take Bob and see if we can't pick up their trail. He'll keep his mouth shut."

"Yeah. Talk is what we want damn' little of, Bud. One word is all them pelicans would need to send them down into the breaks — and I ain't a doubt in the world but what they got hide-outs

down in there where they kin live a year if they feel that way, and never show a head. You beat it now, Bud. I'll gwan down an' take Bob's place. I kin walk slow. An' I'll have some lie thunk up fer Delkin an' Bradley, time they git t' askin' questions about you. They're so tickled to git their claws on Palmer that they won't say much. We'll let on like you 'n' Bob had t' go home fer somethin'. I'll fix it."

At the house Delkin and Bradley were having quite enough to occupy their minds without watching the coming and going of the Meadowlark boys. Palmer was conscious, sitting up in a chair and getting somewhat the best of an amateurish third degree which Delkin and Bradley were attempting to give him. Palmer had a wet towel tied around his head, and the loose folds collected extra moisture and sent it trickling down his seamed, sallow face and his collar. Palmer's eyes were just as human as a snake's with an opaque, impersonal glitter that masked effectually the thoughts shuttling back and forth in his brain. Now and then he barked a question of his own which proved how well his brain was working in spite of the gash on his head.

"Killed two of my men, ay? Come on to my ranch and shot down two men in cold blood—

that what you're tryin' to tell me I'm responsible fer? "

"We didn't shoot your men," Delkin explained, when he should not have replied to the charge. "They shot each other. They were after the loot from the bank, and they're lying down there inside your pasture fence, waiting for the sheriff to look them over when he gets here. Even you thieves and murderers can't hang together, it seems. They meant to get the plunder and leave you in the lurch."

"Plunder? What plunder is that? "

"The stuff you folks stole from the bank—"

"Looky here, Mr. Delkin. You be careful what you say! It ain't safe to make charges you ain't prepared to prove. I'm just remindin' you now that there's a law that takes care of malicious slander. I can't answer fer Bat an' Ed, but I want you to understand the bank owes me over seven thousand dollars that I had on deposit—and that was stole—so you claim. You been hand-in-glove with the Meddalark right along, and I'm the loser by it. Ef I was you folks, I wouldn't shoot off my mouth too much about that bank robbery."

Delkin and Bradley withdrew to talk it over, and it was then they discovered that Bud and

Gelle were missing. With Tony and Jack Rosen on guard at the house, they hurried down to the pasture and found Gelle reclining in the grass with his hat over his eyes to shield them from the slanting rays of the sun, and Mark Hanley sitting cross-legged beside him, killing time by carefully whittling a stick to a sharp point and cutting the point off so that he could sharpen another; an endless occupation so long as the stick lasts.

"Bud? Him an' Bob, they went home quite a while ago. Us boys can't all of us be away more 'n a few hours at a stretch, an' Lark had give them first four a coupla days off. I jest come awn in with Bud fer the day, but now I'm kinda laid out so I can't ride, and Bob, he went home in my place." Gelle vouchsafed a glance apiece to Delkin and Bradley before he let the hat drop down again over his face. They could not know, of course, that beneath the hat his lips were twitching with ironic laughter.

"Yeah, they been gone half an hour, mebbe more," Mark contributed idly. "How long do we have to set here an' keep them unlovely dead from feelin' lonesome?"

Without answering, Delkin turned and walked back to the house, Bradley following close.

"What do you think about it, Jim?" Bradley

asked, when two thirds of the distance had been covered.

"Brad, it doesn't matter what we think or don't think," Delkin told him irritably. "We'll do well to keep it to ourselves, no matter what it is. We won't mention Palmer's money to the sheriff, Brad. The Meadowlark boys have done a lot for the bank — we mustn't overlook that. I suppose they felt they had a right to collect their own damages from Palmer for starting all that talk about them."

"They?"

"Bud and Jelly; one or both. I wouldn't think Bud would have had time to do it, or the inclination. But you can't tell what's going on in a man's mind. Jelly, of course, had the chance and he's the one that suggested taking it. No, sir, we've got to keep our mouths shut for the present, anyway."

"Let it look like them two down there — Bat and Ed White — got away with it," Bradley suggested, all in favor of protecting customers as good as the Meadowlark outfit. "We've got Palmer dead to rights, anyway, and we've got the bank property back. I guess we can afford to let Palmer hunt his own money, eh?"

"They were both in on it," Delkin went on

glumly. "I saw them holding a little private confab down by the well. Bud felt as if he'd better get the stuff into the Basin, I guess, before we asked him about it. But damn' it, Brad, I can't believe either of those boys would steal money!"

"You heard Jelly. They don't call it stealing, Jim, when they annex something that a thief has cached away. Buried treasure, maybe, is what they'd call it. Anyway, they'd have a name that made it sound all right. Well, we'll have to let it go for the present. But I wish they'd kept their hands off that money!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BUD GOES AFTER BUTCH

The two had ridden for a mile or more through the foothills bordering the western line of the Indian Reservation, boring into the wilderness to the east of the Little Smoky, following no trail, but taking the easiest course, Bud leading the way. Certain horse tracks had led off in this direction from a rocky hollow across the road from Palmer's fence corner, and Bud, having determined that point while Bob was sneaking their horses away from the corral where the others were tied before piles of Palmer's treasured new hay, was following a general course without attempting to trail the horsemen who had left their mounts in the hollow.

"Bud, if it's a fair question, I'd like to ask if we're the hunters, or are we the game?" Bob cocked an inquiring eye toward his grim-faced leader.

"Both," Bud made laconic reply.

Bob studied that for a while, reins held high, big body poised lightly in the saddle, while his horse

negotiated a particularly complicated descent through rocks to a gully bottom.

"All right with me, Bud," he said pensively, when they could once more ride together. "What's on my mind right now is when do we feed this purty face of mine?"

"Didn't you eat in town?"

"Nh-nh. Tony, he went and got an idee in his head, and us boys was rung in on workin' it out. It was a hell of an idee, Bud. It started off with bathin' in whisky like they say the Queen of Sheeby done in asses' milk, without drinkin' none. Would you b'lieve that could be done? Well, it can't. But I done it, Bud. Tony, he got t' beefin' around about us fellers gittin' too dawggone drunk t' carry out this swell idee he had, so we done it. And then I'll be darned if Tony, he didn't git jagged and queer the hull entire play by tyin' into Bat Johnson! Made me so darn sore — and then after that, Bud, we was too busy whippin' them pups of Palmer's to go eat like white men. Gosh, I'm holler!"

"Well, so am I, if that will help you any."

"Don't feed a thing but my imagination, Bud. Whatfer party *is* this? Don't tell me a thing — but did you pick me to go off and starve to death with yuh? I'm a pore companion, Bud. Don't

say nothing — I don't want t' hear a thing!"

"I know you don't, so I'll make it short. I found out from Skookum where Palmer cached his money, and I found all the stuff they'd stolen from the bank. Delkin and his outfit took that to town, and left Palmer's where it was. Now it's gone. They think Jelly or I got it — we could have, if we worked fast enough. I think I know where it went, Bob. I think Butch Cassidy got more out of Skookum than the kid realized, and went after the dough himself. We'd beaten him to it, and the bank money is safe. But Jelly and I are in wrong unless we can locate the stuff we left in that cache."

"So you and me is headed fer the Fryin' Pan by our lonelies, thinkin' we can make Butch let loose of Palmer's stuff?"

"That's one way to put it, Bob."

"Well," sighed Bob, after a long interval of deep meditation, "all right. Me, I'm a chancey cuss, anyway. I crawled into a wolf den once, and the old she come and crawled in with me by another hole I didn't know about, and caught me with about four pups in my arms." He heaved another reminiscent sigh. "D' you pick awn me, Bud, b'cause you knew I had the heart of an angry lion?"

Bud's brown-velvet eyes smiled briefly into his.

"I picked you primarily because I knew you'd keep your mouth shut afterwards."

"Primarily, it's a cinch I will," Bob agreed with melancholy assurance. "Dead men tells no tales outa school. That's why."

"Oh, I don't think it will be that bad. They can't be far ahead of us, Bob. We may not have to go clear to the Frying Pan."

"No, boy, we might not live that long. But that's all right — only I always did hate the thoughts of dyin' on an empty stomach."

"Why the sudden pessimism?" Having worries of his own, Bud leaned to sarcasm.

"Gosh, I'd *eat* that word if I could chew it!" Bob muttered longingly. "Say a softer one about that same length, won't you, p'fessor?"

"Go to the devil!" growled Bud angrily.

"I might, at that. I feel m'self slippin' that way," sighed Bob. "If it's a fair question, just what do you aim to do when we meet up with Butch? Ride up and say, 'H'lo, Butch, I'd thank yuh fer that money or whatever you swiped from Palmer,' and then fall back graceful outa yore saddle, or what? B'cause Butch is bound to shoot. Don't make no mistake about that."

"What I do," said Bud shortly, "will depend

on circumstances. I'm not fool enough to draw a chart. If Butch has been over here, he got that money. If he got it, I'm going to get it away from him and turn it over to Delkin. Only a fool would plan the details at this stage of the game."

"Yeah, that's right," Bob admitted meekly.

For a time they rode in silence, Bud leaning over the saddle horn to study the loose soil of the canyon bottom. Bob, riding close behind him, studied each wrinkle and draw with eyes narrowed to keener vision in the soft half-lights of early evening when the shadows were sliding higher and higher on the western slopes and the peaks stood out all golden, clean cut against the tinted clouds.

"Three horses," Bud looked over his shoulder to announce. "All shod, but I've a hunch there's only one rider. Butch is so darned foxy I'm going to outguess him right here." He pulled up and swung round so that Bob, halting likewise, faced him. "Bob, you've done a good deal of riding over this way, so I'll let you take the lead from now on. Never mind the tracks. I believe Butch thought he'd try the loose-horse stunt, and brought a couple along with him. Farther on he'll turn them loose and haze them up different canyons — scatter the tracks. But I happen to

know the shoe marks of that high-stepping brown he rides all the while. He's ahead of the other two, and back there where those rocks are lying helter-skelter Butch rode ahead and the other two followed him like led horses. Riders would have picked different trails among those rocks. You didn't follow my tracks, you remember. Each rider has his own notions of such things, and no man likes to trail right after another rider unless the path is so narrow he's got to. Ever notice that?"

"Ye-ah, now you speak of it. Gosh, you'll be a smart man, Bud, when yo're growed up."

"Well, right ahead here, I'll bet you a new hat the tracks will jumble a bit and then separate. And, Bob, I'm betting on another psychological twist. I bet you Butch will angle through these hills, and won't make straight for the Frying Pan. He'll be watching out behind — that's one reason why I'm holding back just here. We don't want to crowd him, come to think of it. What we want to do is hit straight for the Frying Pan by the shortest trail we know. Or the shortest you know. I lost a lot of trail lore in the years I had to spend in school."

"Yeah, I get you, Bud. I know a short cut through these hills, all right. But what if he don't

show at the Fryin' Pan? Looks like a long gamble, t' me."

"He will. He's working there, and the Frying Pan is a bad bunch to break with. Butch is foxy. Also, he wants the big end, if I'm any judge. I'll bet you he hasn't said a word to Kid or any of the others about this deal. Didn't you see how Butch's eyes kind of glittered when I counted out that fifteen hundred to Kid? It was a pretty sight — gold twenties and tens stacked like poker chips on the table. Fifty twenty-dollar gold pieces — ten piles, five high, and fifty ten-dollar pieces, five piles ten high. It was enough to make any one's mouth water for gold money, wasn't it, Bob? I saw Butch's face when Kid raked the gold back into the bags. I saw how his tongue went licking across his lips —"

"Made me lick m' chops too, Bud. And I ain't no thief," Bob put in fairly.

"Then think how you'd scheme if you *were* a thief!" Bud flashed back. "Put yourself in Butch's place. If you knew about where you could annex a fortune in gold and paper money — stolen goods that every one knew you couldn't have taken from the bank — and all you had to do was to ride over on the quiet and swipe it away from thieves — would *you* tell anybody else and have

to divvy? You know damned well you wouldn't, Bob. Neither would I. I'd want it all.

"And by thunder! Bob, that's why he brought along extra horses! I'll bet you he thought he might need one to pack away the bank loot. He wouldn't know exactly how bulky it was, you see. Well, maybe it was partly that, and partly to make enough tracks to confuse Palmer's bunch. If he got the stuff to the Frying Pan, and needed help to hang on to it, he could cache most of the gold and then take Kid in on the deal and split the rest. At least, that's what I'd do."

"And is this what you'd do too? Set here chinnin' all night an' let him git the money all spent b'fore we take in after him?" Bob's voice had lost its humorous patience. "Me, I'm ready to swaller m' saddle strings like they was egg noodles! You wanta git over to the Fryin' Pan by the shortest rowt. Nothin' like hunger to drive a man, Bud, so I'm goin' to lead yuh back to them rocks and take awn up over the ridge. It'll be nasty ridin' after dark, so I advise you to pry yore eyes loose from them tracks and come awn, if yo're goin' with me."

He reined his horse around and rode back the way they had come without another word or glance, and Bud followed him. Plainly, Butch

had chosen to keep to the canyons where he could duck out of sight or even lay an ambush if necessary. That way must be longer, and in spite of the rough going Bud counted on making time.

The stars were out in a velvet sky when the two loped unhurriedly up the long lane which was the only feasible approach to the Frying Pan, and pulled up at the high, barbed-wire fence that warded off intruding animals from the dooryard. Kid himself came walking stiltedly down the beaten path to the gate, and behind the green-curtained windows the boisterous talk and laughter stilled. In the shadow of the house, away from the seeping light from the windows, darker shadows indicated the blurred outlines of Frying Pan men who were making unobtrusive investigation of these unheralded horsemen.

"Why, hello, Bud," Kid cried distinctly, for the comfort of his men. A note of genuine surprise was in his voice which Bud wished had been pitched in a lower key. "That you, Bob? Turn your bronchs in the big corral and come on in. Had yore supper?"

That word brought a groan from Bob so lugubrious that Kid laughed.

"Hey, Bill! Come take the boys' horses to the corral, will yub? Bob's groanin' fer pie — I

know that tone, Bob." Then he added carelessly, "Butch didn't come back with you, eh?"

"We've been scurruping around — looking for a couple of those horses," Bud lied. "Butch will be along, maybe. Was he coming back to-night?"

"Said he was when he started out this morning. But I dunno, Bud. That Eastern girl's a strong drawin' card, looks like. Guess you folks 'll just about have to carry rocks in your pocket for Butch! Any time you ketch him ridin' into the Basin, you just rock him home, will yuh?"

"You know it!" Bob made emphatic declaration. "Say, our little pilgress ain't to be dazzled by no sech a hypnotizer as Butch. Say, d' yuh mind if I clean the Fryin' Pan plumb outa grub? I got an appetite, me."

Kid laughed and waved him toward the kitchen. He and Bud followed more slowly and Kid's mind still tarried with Butch.

"Butch kinda wanted to go back with you fellers, I guess," he remarked. "He never said a word about it, though, till you'd been gone an hour or so; then it was too late — I had to use him. B'sides that, I kinda got the idee you and him didn't hitch very well. Butch is kinda funny, that way. Takes streaks. You don't want to pay no attention to him, Bud."

"Why," said Bud, "I never had a word with Butch except that sneering remark he made about those black horses. I didn't mind that. They'll all be jealous before I'm through."

What Kid replied Bud could not have told five minutes after. His mind was keyed up to meet a crisis, and this desultory talk irritated him, distracting his thoughts at a time when he needed to be most alert. One thing he knew: Kid either was wholly ignorant of Butch's design, or he was playing his part so carefully that he would be dangerous later on when Butch came riding home.

Yet there was another point which Bud wanted to think upon. If Kid Kern knew of that bank money and bonds hidden away in Palmer's cow pasture, would he let Butch ride alone after it? Just one possible reason for that occurred to Bud, and that was Kid's wily caution that would think first of establishing an alibi that could not be broken. On the other hand, Palmer would never dare to accuse him openly; moreover, he would immediately suspect the Meadowlark. So far as Bud knew, the Frying Pan outfit had never been mentioned in connection with the tragedy at the bank, save as he and Gelle had spoken of the possibility of the Frying Pan's implication. In the face of Kid's untroubled manner and his evi-

dent indifference to Butch's movements, Bud decided that Butch was indeed playing a lone hand; snap judgment, he knew, because he was not left alone long enough to reason it out.

"Come on in and eat," Kid was urging hospitably. "I guess Bob ain't licked the Fryin' Pan clean, already." He laughed at his own joke, standing poised on the doorstep, perhaps wondering why Bud lagged behind.

"I don't feel like eating just now, Kid. Just let me sit out here in the dark for a while. One of those splitting headaches — I don't want the light in my eyes."

"Cup uh coffee'll do yuh good, Bud." Kid turned back with a solicitous air that was extremely well done if it was assumed to lull suspicion. "Tell you what. You go awn upstairs to bed, and I'll send up some coffee. You know where you slept last time; you go crawl in there."

"No." Bud's tone was sharp and decisive. "It's cooler out here, and — if you'll send out a cup of coffee, I'll drink it. And for the Lord sake, Kid, don't go and baby around about me! If you bawl it out to the bunch, I'll take a fall out of you, sure as you're born, when my head quits jumping. All I want is to be left strictly alone for a while."

"Well, I could lick you, but have it yore own way, Bud. Sick folks has got to be humored, they say."

Bud, lying on the ground with his head on his arms, wished with all his healthy young appetite that he dared go in and eat his fill. But that was a joy he must postpone — and then it struck him that Kid might dope the coffee!

The door opened and shut with a bang. Bud rolled over on his face, reached back cautiously and drew his gun from its holster and held it concealed under his folded arms. Lying so, he was as ready for instant action as is a cat that has drawn back its feet and tensed its muscles for a spring.

His nerves relaxed, his mind once more was at peace concerning the immediate future. Lying there on the ground, he could hear the faintest sound of far-off hoof beats when Butch came riding home. And unless Kid or some other began shooting bullets into his prone body without warning, he could take the initiative, could dominate any situation that might arise.

The cup of coffee he waved away when Kid brought it, though the delectable aroma maddened him after his long fast.

"Would yuh take a headache powder, Bud? I

got some that shore would knock that pain." The voice of Kid Kern was full of friendly sympathy. He never dreamed that Bud's six-shooter was looking at him bleakly over Bud's left forearm.

"No — this is fine. I'm easy so long as I don't have to move." This was true enough, as Bud recognized with a fleeting grin. "Don't bother any more about me."

"Oh, I'll set with the sick any time." Kid squatted on his haunches, after the manner of outdoor men, and began rolling a cigarette. "Keep the boys from gittin' curious. They'll think we're talkin' private out here."

Silence fell, save for the creaking of crickets, the whisper of a cool breeze through the grass next the fence. Kid smoked, his big hat tilted back on his head, his eyes turned thoughtfully up toward the stars. Bud lay quietly with his face on his folded arms, his gun against his cheek, ready to come up shooting at the first breath of need. The cooling coffee sent faint whiffs of torturing fragrance to his nostrils. His eyes, half closed under the pinned-back brim of his hat, regarded Kid with unblinking attention. His ears, like faithful sentinels set on guard by his intrepid spirit, listened for hoof beats down the lane.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"NEXT TIME, REMEMBER — BUTCH PACKS TWO GUNS!"

Bob came out fairly licking his chops over the enormous supper he had just gorged; took in the situation at a glance, hovered there helplessly for a space and announced that he was going back in and have a game or two of high-five with the boys. He kicked Bud's foot in passing; a hint which Bud could interpret as he pleased, though what Bob meant to signal was his intention to guard against treachery from the house.

Kid asked Bud how he felt, received a mumbled assurance that he was all right, and rolled and lighted another cigarette. A tactful companion was Kid Kern upon occasion; one who knew the Indian art of absolute passivity. It shamed Bud a bit to know that if he had been really suffering as he pretended to be, Kid would have sat right there all night if necessary, with never a complaint.

Then it came — the far-off *clupet-clupety-clupet* of a shod horse loping up the lane. Bud moved

his long body a bit, drawing up one knee for leverage when the moment came to spring erect, and shifting his forehead so that his left hand pressed palm downward on the ground.

"How's she comin', Bud?" Kid poised his cigarette between two stained fingers while he peered down at Bud through the bright starlight. "Worse? Better let me get yuh that powder."

"No use — it's easing up — by spells." In the pauses Bud was listening, gauging the swiftness of the approach. Kid, he could see, had not yet caught the sound that had come clearly to Bud's ear pressed against the sod. His heart began to thump heavily, high in his chest. He could feel his face grow hot with the uprush of blood, and knew it was not fear that rioted within his body, but battle fever instead; the excitement that sends hot young blood leaping when conflict is near.

"Somebody comin'. Butch, I guess." Kid ground his cigarette stub under his heel as he rose.

The action and the announcement together gave Bud the excuse to rise also to a half-crouching position, poised on the balls of his feet like a runner waiting for the signal to go; a posture that would pass in the starlight as the squatting of a

man whose interest is not sufficient to bring him to his feet. A full minute they listened to the nearing hoof beats, then the dim outline of a horseman showed in the lane.

"Yeah, that's Butch. I'll go open the gate — er — no, that horse of his is broke to gates, come to think of it."

Bud said nothing. He was watching Butch Cassidy sidle up to the gate post, lean and push back the heavy wooden bolt, nip through as the gate swung open, catch it midway and sidle back, pushing it shut as he went. The horse stood quiet while the bar slid into place, then Butch came riding toward them.

"What's takin' place here? One of them garden parties yuh read about?" Butch laughed and swung a leg over the cantle to dismount.

"Yes. It's my party, Butch." Bud was up and standing so close behind him that Kid, ten feet away and in front of them, could not have shot without hitting both. "Keep your hands up — just like that." He reached forward, twitched Butch's gun from its holster and thrust it into his own.

"Why — what's wrong with Butch?" Kid's voice was surprised, but it had not lost its friendly note.

"Nothing much, only he shot a couple of men and stole a few thousand dollars out of Palmer's cow pasture, and the blame rests on Jelly and me until I take this pelican in and return the money."

"Aw, he's full of prunes, Kid. Don't you b'lieve a word of that." Butch stood with his hands raised — any man will who feels the muzzle of a gun in his ribs — and stared at Kid. "I ain't been near Palmer's place. Are you goin' t' stand fer this kind of a hold-up, Kid, right in yore door-yard?"

"I dunno, Butch, till I see how she lays." Kid's tone took on a silky smoothness. "Seems funny Bud would take the trouble to ride 'way over here just fer a josh to hold you up and accuse you of a thing like that. Must be a little something to it."

"He's crazy, that's all."

"I suppose you didn't leave a couple of horses tied in a draw just across the road from Palmer's fence corner! I suppose I didn't find your tracks, heading this way, when Bob and I struck out to overhaul you? I happen to know how you pumped Skookum to get all the information you could. He doesn't know how much he told you, but it was enough to make you feel sure you could put your

hands right on the money the bank lost! Well, I took Delkin and some others out there, so they beat you to it, Butch. The trouble is, they left a lot that belonged to Palmer, and that's what you packed off with you after you'd shot Bat Johnson and Ed White. They were after it too, I suppose. Some of our boys in town scared them till they beat it out of town, and they caught you there at the ledge. You downed them both, and got away with the stuff.

"Kid, I don't think for a minute that you'd go in on a deal of this kind — but I'll bet a horse Butch never gave you a chance! That's playing real square with you, isn't it?"

"No, Bud, it ain't. I never dreamed Butch would pull a thing like this, and him workin' fer me. I hope you don't look on me as bein' capable of rusty work like that, Bud." He took a step forward, then halted. "How about this? Think you c'n trust me to help yuh go through Butch and see if he's got that money? How much was it? If he's got it with him, by Harry, he'll come clean. I hate t' turn in one of my own men, but I'll do it — I'll turn him over to the sheriff myself if there's a scrap of evidence t' hold him on. Can I come and look in his slicker, Bud?"

"I wish you would, Kid." Bud caught Butch

by the slack of his coat and pulled him backwards, away from the horse. "I trust you, yes. Sure, I do! But I'll put a bullet through you, Kid, if you try a double-cross."

"That's all right. Can't blame you, Bud. Butch working for me, it does look kinda leery around here. But you can't do two things at once, very handy, and I'm damned if I'll stand for any man of mine pulling off a stunt like this and giving the Frying Pan a black eye with my neighbors."

"Go ahead and *look*, why don'tcha?" Butch challenged mockingly. "Sure, you'll try 'n' keep yore stand-in, Kid — you ain't got a man that don't know you'd quit him cold in a pinch, and save yore own bacon! Go ahead an' *look!*"

"You bet I'll look!" Kid picked up the reins, ran his hand reassuringly along the shoulder of the brown horse, grasped the horn and gave the saddle a little shake, and began untying Butch's slicker from behind the cantle, his fingers probing into the folds. "How much was it, Bud?"

"I don't know. It was gold, and there must have been several thousand dollars, at a rough guess. Nobody meddled with it — except the man that took it. Three or four regular coin bags, there ought to be."

Kid pulled off the slicker and slapped it on the ground, wide open and empty. Butch carried no saddle pockets, and there was no place on the saddle where a package of any size could be hidden.

Butch laughed unpleasantly.

"There ain't a darned thing, Bud." Kid turned and looked at the two. There was an awkward silence.

"Well, ain't somebody goin' to apologize?" Butch still had that mocking tone. "Bud's had a pipe dream, that's all. Now, I'll tell yuh where I been, and Bud c'n prove it easy enough. I been over to the Meddalark. I admit I went over there t' see Lark about gittin' a job. I stayed to dinner, and all the boys is gone but that pilgrim; yore black horses is in the bronch corral, Bud, and the kid's ridin' a pinto pony around he calls Huckleberry. Need any more proof, or does that convince yuh that I was *there,* all right?" Butch's tone was arrogant, though he was careful to make no offensive movement.

"Oh, you were there, no doubt. That doesn't let you out, Butch. Tell me where you were between four and five this afternoon!"

"Awn the road home," Butch drawled.

Bud twitched off Butch's hat and held it up in

his left hand so that the edge of the brim was silhouetted against the stars.

"Look here, Kid. I suppose he'll say he bit that nick out of his hatbrim! Ever see a prettier bullet mark? Just about the size a .45 would make as nearly as I can tell in this light. Just for curiosity, Butch, how did you get that?" Bud's voice, that had been merely grim and unyielding, rang with triumph.

"None of yore damn' business. Is that plain enough, or shall I spell it?"

"No," said Bud softly, "you needn't spell it, Butch."

Followed another silence, which Kid broke placatingly.

"If Butch done what you think he done, Bud, I'm after him like a wolf. But if this is all the proof you got, why — you ain't got *any,* that's all." He stopped on the brink of saying more and looked from one to the other.

"Yeah. You ain't got *any,*" Butch echoed, with that same faint mockery in his voice. "Goin' to hold me here all night? Me and my horse is hungry."

"Didn't anybody see him at Palmer's?" Kid asked doubtfully. And when Bud shook his head, Kid made a similar gesture. "Honest, Bud, I

don't see what you're goin' to do about it," he said. "I'm with you if you've got any proof. But—"

"I'll get it," Bud declared harshly, and lowered his gun. "All right, Butch, this time you've got the best of it. But remember, I'll get that proof, and I'll get *you*. And I don't mean that I'll kill you, either."

"What the hell do I care what you mean?" Butch took down his arms, rubbing his muscles unthinkingly. "Only—if kids are bound to git underfoot, they're liable to git stepped on. Yuh goin' to give me my gun back? Or are yuh scared to?"

Bud gave him his gun haughtily, butt first according to the range code of good manners. Butch slid it into his holster and reached for the bridle reins.

"Kid, you spread my slicker so you c'n pick it up off the ground," he said, and pulled the reins up along his horse's neck. He mounted, sat looking down at Bud for a minute, gave a grunt eloquent of tolerant scorn and rode away to the stable at a careless lope.

The two stood looking after him until his figure blurred with the deeper shade of the barn.

"Bud, I'm sorry it turned out the way it did,"

Kid said under his breath. "I believe in my soul Butch done it — but what does that prove? I want to warn yuh, though. You've made an enemy there that ain't liable to forgit yuh. It's a darn good thing I happened to be out here with yuh, boy. Butch don't dare pull nothin' underhand when I'm around, but if you'd tackled him alone out here, it maybe wouldn't 'a' turned out so peaceful." He gave a little inarticulate exclamation. "Say, Bud, next time you bump into Butch, remember *he packs two guns.* He could of got you any time he wanted to t'night. Next time you pull a gun on Butch Cassidy I'd advise yuh as a friend to pull the trigger at the same time. May as well play safe, then it won't be you we'll have to bury."

"I suppose that's a friendly tip, and as such I thank you for it, Kid." Bitterness was all that was left to young Bud at that moment.

"Yes, and I wouldn't give it to everybody, either. Might as well come along in and have some supper, Bud — now yore headache's cured."

But Bud shook his head and said he couldn't swallow a mouthful, so Kid did not urge him. Perhaps he knew what it means when a young man must swallow his pride.

Bob came out to them, and all he learned was

that they were going back home that night. Once again Kid did not urge Bud to modify his decision; instead, he approved it.

"Butch will shore be on the peck, now, and it'll be just as well to side-step. Here he comes — you boys can get your horses out, and I'll keep an eye on Butch. Too bad, but there ain't a thing more I can do, or you either."

"No," said Bud dully, "I guess not. I made a fool of myself, that's all."

They were riding down the lane before Bud came out of his black mood of depression, or Bob dared open his mouth to ask a question.

"It's a cinch he stopped and cached the money somewhere along the way," Bud cried hotly, when they had gone carefully over the whole thing together. "What we have to do now is try and find it."

"Yeah, and beat Butch to it," Bob reminded. "Now, I know all this end of the reservation like a book. Butch, he'd hide that money purty close in, I betcha, but not along the trail nowhere. Can't back trail him to-night, but by daylight —" He stopped there for a time. "Tell yuh, Bud, what we better do. Awn a piece here is that crick, and I betcha we could pick up Butch's tracks there where he cut across into the hills.

It's about the only place where he could leave the trail without making signs a blind man could read; what's more, it's the only place where he could git into the hills without ridin' an hour er more extry.

"What we better do is you go awn home and git some chuck inside yuh, and take a sleep. I'll bed right down by that crick till daybreak, and pick up Butch's back track. I kin jest about read that jasper's mind, Bud. You put Kid wise, and Kid'll be watchin' Butch like a hawk. It'll be kinda funny if Butch gits a chance to ride back here fer a day er two. Right now is when he's got to take a big chance and leave the money where it's at. When you git ready, you come awn back with some grub. Foller the trail we took comin' over, and I'll meet yuh, Bud, right where that spring comes up under them sandstone cliffs. You know — where we watered our horses. They's feed, and we c'n make camp there if we have to. I know where we c'n crawl under a shelf if it storms, even.

"So you do that, Bud. It'll save time, and we'll find the dough — never you mind about that!"

"If it takes until snow flies, we've got to find it," Bud declared. "Well, I'll tell you when we reach the creek whether I'll do that or not."

CHAPTER TWENTY

"THINGS KINDA SLIPPED UP"

Two motley roosters and a black Minorca were craning necks to outcrow one another before the dawn. Out of the chill dark came Bud, the Walking Sorrel swinging automatically along in the long strides of the running walk that gave him his name and made him better than most horses on a long, hard trail. When he stopped, the sorrel's legs trembled with exhaustion. Bud's spurred boots dragged like an old man's on the path to the house, and his head buzzed until the roosters, the frogs and the humming of mosquitoes blended in one muffled, discordant chorus.

As he stepped upon the porch Maw sat up, rubbing her eyes, and got out of bed, dragging a faded, big-flowered kimono over her nightgown and thrusting tiny, bare feet into a shapeless pair of slippers much too large for her. Her muslin nightcap went up to a peak at the crown of her head. She looked like a female goblin fleeing from a midnight rendezvous as she came pattering into the kitchen with a lighted candle held

aloft in her hand, her round eyes blinking with sleep.

"My, I bet you're about starved, Buddy! When a boy gets in this time of night, I *know* he's hungry. I set back a whole berry pie for you, and the cream for it is all whipped and ready. I thought I wouldn't spread it till you come, because if it stands too long the crust gets soggy. And there's plenty of cold fried chicken — I saved you the gizzards, Bud, and three wings. I know how you like them parts. Nev' mind washin' your face. You set right down and I'll have you eatin' in two seconds."

That was one of the reasons why the Meadowlark worshiped Maw.

"Drink this, Buddy. It's last night's milk — poured right off the top of the pan, cream and all."

Slumped into the nearest chair by the table, Bud put out a hand slowly and took up the glass, spilling milk on Maw's white tablecloth and down his shirt front because his hand shook so. But the rich milk refreshed him like a draught of wine, and when he had set down the glass — empty — he turned hollow eyes with some interest toward the plate heaped with chicken fried a golden brown as only Maw could do it. Maw was spread-

ing fresh bread for him, two great slices, and she seemed blessedly unconscious of Bud's wolfish feeding, once he started to eat.

But finally, when Bud had finished the third wing and was biting into the bluish knob of a gizzard, Maw hooked her slipper heels over the top rung of her chair and nodded her head like a witch over her cauldron.

"Things kinda slipped up, I s'pose. They will do that no matter how careful we plan. I heard enough of what you and Skookum was talkin' about last night—"

"Last night?" Bud repeated, looking up in dull amazement. "Is that as long ago as it was, Maw?"

"Well, a course it's most mornin' now, so I s'pose I can say night b'fore last. When every minute is crammed and jammed with happenin's, it does seem to take an awful lot of 'em to make a day. The day has gone real quick for me, too. And there's Margy, sayin' Cranford would be real excitin' alongside this place. She got real put out t'day, because you boys went off first thing this forenoon, and then Butch Cassidy come over and spent most all the time foolin' around with Skookum and didn't talk to her much, and somethin' or other went wrong in her story — she was

tellin' me all about it while we washed up the dishes.

"Margy's getting real friendly," Maw went on, after a pause spent in studying Bud's face and in deciding, no doubt, that he was not yet ready to talk of his own affairs. "This afternoon she come right up and put her arm around me and patted me on the shoulder! I didn't s'pose she'd ever get used to me so she could look at me without scringin', but she's got all over that, and it ain't much more'n a week since she come. She's just as sweet as she can be, and she tells me all about everything, real confiding."

"Cranford! Ye gods!" Bud exploded tardily, the full enormity of the outrageous comparison striking him in the middle of his demolishing the plate of chicken. He dropped a clean-picked thigh bone on the heap beside his plate and looked at Maw with a shadow of his old, impudent grin. "If Marge were a man I'd show her some excitement, maybe."

"She's writing a bank-robbery story, Bud, and — maybe I hadn't ought to tell you — she's got you for the hero of it. She —"

"Me for the hero? Good Lord!"

"Well," said Maw, blinking at him across the table, "looks to me as if you'd had about all the

adventures she's put you through in her story, except I don't s'pose you've been arrested for the murder and throwed in jail and incarcerated, like Margy had 'em do to you. She says it's awful hard to make up excitin' things, when she come out here expectin' that things would happen right along that she could use fine. She says she's goin' to have the Indians break out and start massacreeing the whites, and she wanted all day to ask you about some secret order; Golden Arrer, she says it is. She wants to make it a religious outbreak of some kind, and either let 'em catch you and start in to torture you, or else have you save a girl from bein' tortured. She tried to get Lark to tell her, but Larkie's kinda queer about some things. She couldn't get a peep outa him. He told her there wasn't no such thing, but of course she knew he was just denyin' it for some reason of his own. She thinks maybe he's mixed up and implicated somehow — maybe a high priest of the order; but I told her I didn't hardly believe he was."

Bud gave a whoop and choked so that Maw climbed down from her chair and came around and thumped him between the shoulders until he could wave her off with weak gestures of refusal. He came to with his face red and blinking tears,

but he had no sooner got his breath than he began to laugh.

"I s'pose I've said somethin' funny, but I don't see what." Maw spoke tartly when the first outburst had subsided. "I guess you oughta be in pretty good shape now after gorgin' the way you have. I'll go call Lark, and then I expect maybe you'll see fit to tell us what's happened, and what brings you home this time in the morning, lookin' like a string of suckers and eatin' like you'd starved for a week. And all I can say," she stopped to say pettishly, "is that small matters amuse small minds. If I used a word wrong, that's *my* business!" She scuttled off before Bud could explain.

Maw was further shocked to find Bud emptying the pantry of cooked food when she returned to the kitchen. Four loaves of fresh baked bread reposed neatly beside half a baked ham, and the cookie jar was in his arms.

"For the love of Moses!" snapped Maw. "Didn't you get enough to eat *yet?*"

Behind her, Lark glanced appraisingly at the devastated table and grinned. The pile of chicken bones beside Bud's plate was enough, to say nothing of the remnant of pie with the whipped cream scraped off in streaks.

"For the time being, maybe; but I may possibly want to eat again, Maw, before Marge has me put in jail and incarcerated!" Bud was still badly in need of sleep, and Maw's tone had not been conciliating.

"I ain't responsible for that word, Bud Larkin. Margy used it herself, and if it don't meet with your approval, it's none of *my* funeral. Here's Lark, wantin' to know what you've been up to, and why you come draggin' your feet into the house this time of night. Are you goin' to take *all* them cookies, Bud? I can't make any more till I get some sour cream. I churned every bit that I had."

"You did? Fine! Bob's out in the hills, and fresh butter will go dandy with this bread. You know, Maw, there's only one real bread-maker in the world, and she's just about four feet high and cross as a she bear with toothache."

"I ain't no such a thing! Do you s'pose you could carry a pie if I wrapped it up good?"

"Sure. I'll carry it inside, however. Then I *know* it will be well wrapped. Lark may want to carry one. How about it, Lark? Want to go hunting with me, after I've had an hour or so of sleep?"

Lark hitched up his belt, picked up Maw and

set her on a corner of the table. Then, ignoring her indignant protests, he began his preparations significantly in the gun closet, choosing what weapons he would take. Bud eyed him from under straight brows while he wrapped the bread in one of Maw's choicest dish towels which she kept for "comp'ny", when some range woman would insist upon helping her with the dishes.

"You won't need a shotgun — and I'll just omit that hour of sleep. Maw's pie is a real rejuvenator."

"It ain't no such a thing! Bud, ain't you goin' to tell what you've been up to or where you've been? My land, I never saw such carryin's on!"

"Nothing exciting, Maw. Nothing that Marge could use in that story of hers. Come on, Lark."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LARK WOULD HAVE DONE THINGS DIFFERENTLY

"Well, so-long, Lark." Bud held his nervous buckskin to a prancy circling while he and Lark indulged in one of those last-minute dialogues without which two persons seem unable to part in complete satisfaction. "If you can get Jelly off to one side, you might tell him that Bob and I are going to stick to the trail like a burr to a dog. And of course you'll know what to say to Delkin. Use your own judgment about telling him the facts."

"You better bed down somewhere and take a snooze," Lark advised perfunctorily. "I'll go 'long and meet Bob. I know these hills better than anybody, I guess. You go awn into town and git into bed somewhere. Then you can attend the inquest if they hold one. Mebbe they might not, seein' it's a clear case, s' far as they know. You go awn, Bud, and let me handle this deal."

"No. This is my job, Lark. I'll take that rifle of yours, though. I was so afraid Maw would pump something out of me and tell it to

Marge that I rushed off without anything much except the grub. I wanted it cooked, so we won't need to make a smoke. No, you go on in and say I came back home and you sent me out on the range. And, Lark, if I don't bring Butch in and turn him over to the sheriff, it won't do any good whatever to say anything to Delkin and the others. They'll believe what they please — and that won't be very favorable to Jelly and me. Just let it ride; and don't worry about Bob and me, will you? No telling how long we'll be out. One of us will ride in to the ranch if it's necessary — and I'd a good deal rather handle it without interference if it's all the same to you."

"Oh, all right, if you feel that way about it, Bud. You shore got me up early enough — jest to ride a piece down the road with yuh! Go ahead and handle it without interference then! Mebbe later on you'll be darn glad of a little plain old help! Needn't think Butch is goin' to be easy to take — he'll go down harder 'n cod-liver oil. But all right — have it yore way; you will anyhow." Whereupon, Lark put spurs to his horse and loped on down the trail towards Smoky Ford, talking to himself. He had been coolly pushed aside, robbed of a share in what promised to be a risky piece of business. Impudent, he called it,

and forgot how he had deliberately pushed Bud to the front and encouraged him to use his own judgment.

No, Lark would have done it differently; followed old Bill's methods more closely. Old Bill would have taken his riders and gone boldly after Butch, and made what he would have called a clean-up over at the Frying Pan. Bud might believe that Kid was ignorant of Butch's plans, but Lark did not. It would surprise him to discover that Kid was in on the deal. Still, Bud might wake up to facts and realize that after all an older head might hold a few ideas worth considering.

Bud, however, was not awake to much of anything save the fact that he was beginning to lose interest in anything but sleep; and that the buckskin was a tricky brute in the hills and not to be compared with the Walking Sorrel. The buckskin had a way of climbing hills in leaps that gave no thought to secure footing, but left him winded at the top. His manner of descending a steep slope was quite as reckless and consisted of a series of slides interspersed with dancing sidewise and taking fright at various objects. Bud had saddled him because he happened to be in a corral where he was handy, but he was wishing now — when he roused sufficiently to wish for anything except

sleep — that he had taken the time to catch a horse out of the pasture. It might have proved quicker in the long run.

So, slipping, sliding, fighting the buckskin and guarding as best he could his burden of food, Bud arrived in the course of time at the spring beneath the sandstone cliffs. By that time he was indifferent to everything. It would have taken Butch Cassidy himself to rouse Bud to the fighting point. He was glad, in a dull, apathetic way, that he had made the trip from the ranch so that Bob could eat before he got as hungry as Bud had been. He managed also to picket the buckskin in the middle of good grass, and to put the supplies up on a shelf of rock away from small prowlers. After that Bud dropped down in the shade of the cliff, pulled his hat over his eyes, gave one huge sigh and dropped like a plummet into the oblivion of dreamless slumber.

At the Palmer ranch black Sam was shuffling back and forth across the kitchen, clearing away the débris of a scanty breakfast well-cooked, where nine men had eaten silently and gone their ways; all except Gelle, who had volunteered to remain on guard over Palmer until the sheriff was ready to take him away to the county seat. The coroner had just arrived, and was down in

the cow pasture looking over the scene of the double killing and arguing with the sheriff in the intervals of rolling a fresh chew of tobacco relishfully from cheek to cheek.

Sam turned scared eyes toward Lark before he remembered his manners and ducked his head in what passed for a bow. Gelle, on a bench before the door, grinned cheerful greeting.

"You musta heard the news and got up b'fore breakfast," Gelle bantered. "Bud git in last night?"

Lark swung down and sat on the bench beside his "top hand"—as Gelle loved to consider himself.

"Bud got in this morning before daylight. Hauled me outa bed and started me out thinkin' I was goin' to git some excitement, mebbe. Then he hazed me awn in whilst he took out across country to meet Bob."

"Which means, I guess, that they didn't have no luck last night." Gelle's voice betrayed his disappointment.

"Depends on what you call luck," Lark retorted. "That fool kid rode over to the Fryin' Pan, laid out in the yard with Kid Kern till Butch come ridin' in, then up and sticks a gun in Butch's ribs and tells him to come clean with that money

he'd stole outa the pasture here. What's more, the darn chump got away with it, and come home without a bullet hole through him. I dunno how it strikes you, Jelly, but I'd call that *luck.*"

"And didn't he git the money?"

"Naw." Lark stopped while he lighted a cigarette. "He got the laugh."

"How's that? I been awn the anxious seat all night, Lark, worryin' about Bud and that damn' gold of Palmer's. Aw, he can't hear. I've got him tied to the bed back in another room. And the coon's only about half there. Go awn, Lark. I'm achin' to know what happened."

"That's jest the trouble, Jelly. Nothin' atall happened. Kid, he sided in with Bud and said if Butch had come over here and robbed Palmer's cache he'd turn him over to the sheriff himself. Bud thinks he meant it, but I dunno. Butch didn't have nothin' on his saddle but his slicker, and he give Bud the laugh. That's about all there was to it, fur as I could make out. Bud, he come shackin' along home about three this morning, et everything in sight and packed off what's left to feed Bob with.

"Bob stayed out in the hills. They got the idee they can back-track Butch and find out where he cached the stuff. But I dunno — like lookin' fer

a needle in a haystack, to my notion. My Jonah, what a mess! How'd you bust yore rib, Jelly? Bud said you'd done it, but he never said how. Gimme some facts, fer gosh sake!"

By the time Gelle had told all he knew, had heard or surmised, Delkin, Bradley, the sheriff and the coroner came walking up from the pasture, still arguing. They greeted Lark, then drifted back to the subject of the two dead men. The sheriff sensed the work of a third man there, but the others insisted that the killing had been an impromptu duel, the coroner holding that the position in which the men lay had no bearing upon that point, since death was not instantaneous in either case and both had evidently staggered a few feet before falling.

"Kinda funny they'd both be facin' the same way — toward that ledge where you folks got your money," the sheriff pointed out, with a stubborn tilt to his chin. "If they went down fightin' each other, wouldn't they be likely to fall *facin'* each other? They hadn't started to run, neither of 'em. Looks to me like they both went down shootin' at somebody up on that ledge. You can think what yuh please about it — that's what *I* think."

"There couldn't have been anybody on the

ledge," Delkin stated positively. "Bud Larkin was with us; Jelly, here, was at the house with a broken rib; Palmer and the old man were tied up in the bedroom and the coon was here in the kitchen. The four Meadowlark boys had left town ten minutes behind the two Palmer men, and not more than five minutes ahead of us. They heard the shooting as they rode up. The four will swear that Jelly and the coon were here at the house — and as a matter of fact, the rest of us arrived so soon after the shooting that it would have been physically impossible for these two to get back up here."

"Well," retorted the sheriff, quickly, "are these all the men there is in the world, Mr. Delkin?"

"All that could possibly have known anything about what was on the ledge. Bud Larkin found the money and came straight in after us, leaving Jelly to guard the old man that works here. We came right back, got the money and took it on in to town, still leaving Jelly on guard out here. He brought his prisoner to the house — a very wise thing to do, I may say — and so was here when Palmer came, and while capturing him he broke a rib, as you know. You can ask the doctor here whether he would be able, with that

broken rib, to run from the pasture up here in, say, one minute."

"Couldn't have done it without a broken rib," stated the coroner, expectorating a generous amount of tobacco juice. "They shot each other. No reason why they shouldn't, is there? They were both after the money, and each man wanted to get there first. Be funny if they *didn't* fight over it. Guess we better hold an inquest and thrash this thing out before a jury. How soon can you get a jury together, Stilson?" The coroner must have been out of humor with the sheriff, because usually he addressed him familiarly as Jim.

"Hour, maybe. That quick enough? You get your witnesses together, and a few *facts* to show, and I'll have the jury ready to listen to 'em quick enough to ketch 'em before they melt." He probably referred to the facts.

Lark, sitting quietly on the bench during the discussion, wondered why no one mentioned Palmer's money (or what was tacitly conceded to be Palmer's money) which had been left in the cache and was now missing. Delkin and Bradley seemed to avoid any unnecessary reference to money. Lark was on the point of mentioning the one great inducement to murder, the one thing

that would call a man to the ledge. He was even tempted to tell what he knew of Butch Cassidy.

But while the others wrangled his caution came whispering and urging him to wait. If Delkin and Bradley failed to mention the mysterious disappearance of Palmer's gold, it was for one reason. They were grateful to Bud and to Gelle and meant to protect them. Lark appreciated that spirit even while he resented their suspicions. Both emotions held him silent after the first impulse to speak had passed. They knew all about that money being gone, he reflected. If they saw fit to cover up the loss before the sheriff, it would ill become him to drag the thing to the surface and tell the sheriff something that might throw suspicion — or worse — upon the Meadowlark. He joggled Gelle unthinkingly with his elbow, cautioning him to silence, and brought a yelp of pain from that tightly bandaged young man, and a stealthily vicious jab afterwards to show that Gelle had not missed Lark's meaning.

There followed the usual commonplace running to and fro on horses sweating under the urge of their riders' haste to be somewhere else immediately. The coroner's inquest was called, and

practically all of Smoky Ford bustled out to Palmer's ranch and squatted on run-over boot heels and drew diagrams in the dust with little sticks, explaining gravely to any who would listen that the robbery, the murder, and the killing of Bat Johnson and Ed White took place in this or that particular manner.

All I can say is, Marge should have been there with her notebook; two or three notebooks, rather.

Figuratively speaking, the various Sherlocks placed the noose on Palmer's neck a dozen times for a dozen different reasons. They openly mourned that Bat and Ed were past hanging, and there was not a man present who had not known all along that Palmer was at the bottom of the whole thing. So much for the loyalty of neighbors of that type when a man of Palmer's type is called to account for his sins.

The inquest might well be called an anticlimax, since the citizens of Smoky Ford had the thing all settled in their minds before the investigation was officially begun. Palmer puzzled and disappointed them and came near to a lynching, that day, merely because he refused to testify and would only say, with baleful self-possession, that since they were all set on laying the guilt on him,

they could go ahead and think what they pleased; his lawyer would have something to say about it when the thing came to a trial. (It was at this time that Palmer edged close to death.)

The sheriff, being just a bit keyed up by opposition, made a clean sweep of it and took black Sam along with Palmer, and the old man Blinker as well. They might or might not be implicated in the crime, but at least they should prove useful as witnesses.

By mid-afternoon the inquest was over and the sheriff had left for the county seat with his three prisoners, leaving his two deputies ostensibly in charge of Palmer's ranch pending a more satisfactory arrangement. In reality, the sheriff had some hope of solving the mystery of the shooting of two men in broad daylight and within sound of the house, and he had left two men where one would have been sufficient, with secret instructions to make a careful search for some clew to an unknown member of the gang.

The last shovelful of moist, rocky soil had been carelessly tossed upon Bat Johnson's heaped grave, and the two rough mounds marked by stakes driven into the ground, each bearing a name and date burned hastily with a hot iron. The burial party, in haste to join their fellows,

were riding through the gate on their way to town when Maw appeared.

Maw was mad. Never before since her arrival at the Meadowlark a few years before had she been treated as Bud and Lark had treated her that morning. Never before had they failed to tell her all that happened or was about to happen, and Maw did not propose to stand it much longer. She had waited until nine o'clock and then had ordered old Cap and Charlie hitched to the beloved "top buggy" which Lark had given her, and she had bundled Marge and a lunch basket in beside her and started for town. They needn't think, said Maw, that she was going to sit and fold her arms and act like a fool just because they treated her like one. Wherefore she challenged the nearest horseman, who was eyeing Marge with interest.

"How do? See anything of Bud Larkin around here?" Maw was pretty fair at reading signs, and the trampled yard just across the fence with jumbled tracks leading through the gate had told her a story of events.

"No, mom, Bud ain't been here t'day atall."

"Lark been here? Bill Larkin?"

"Yes, mom, Lark was here and he left right after the inquest." The horseman fiddled with

his reins and kept his horse backing and sidling, showing off before Marge.

"Inquest! For the love of Moses, has old Palmer been killed at last?" Maw sucked so hard upon her new teeth that she almost swallowed them.

"No, mom, he's been took to jail. It's Bat Johnson an' Ed White the cor'ner has been settin' on. They was shot yeste'day."

Maw opened her mouth to speak further of her astonishment, then closed it abruptly, took the buggy whip from its socket and struck old Charlie smartly across the rump. Maw's face had gone the color of rancid tallow. There, conjured vividly before her by unreasoning fear, rode the vision of young Bud staggering into the kitchen hollow-eyed and ravenous; wolfing food sufficient for two ordinary appetites and going off with a sackful of supplies.

"I do hope I'll get some decently exciting material out of this," said Marge, all in a flutter. "Do you suppose something worth while has actually taken place, and I'll—"

"Put up that everlastin' notebook!" snapped Maw. "Things ain't picturesque when they're happenin' to your own!" She pulled the indignant horses from a lope as expertly as a man

could have done, and sent them trotting their best down the road to town. "I've got to find Lark and see what's to be done — and it ain't a bit kind or p'lite to use the troubles of your own folks, Margy, to put in stories. If's Buddy's on the dodge for killin' a couple of men, you ain't goin' to put him into no story — you mark what I tell you. Buddy don't *want* to be no heero. And if he don't want to be, he sha'n't be. Time I put my foot down, I guess."

"I'd make Palmer the murderer, of course," Marge placated absently. "What's he been taken to jail for, do you suppose?"

"I dunno — and I don't care. Buddy's on the dodge. I knew it when he cleaned out the pantry without sayin' a word about where he was goin'!"

Maw sucked in her teeth, tapped both horses across their broad backs with the whip, and went lurching on down the road to town, leaving a cloud of dust behind her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

EAVESDROPPER

Five days may not seem long as a rule, but Bud's nerves were ragged with the strain of searching foot by foot the likely places along the trail Butch Cassidy had taken; with eating just enough to allay the sharpest hunger pangs, and with sleeping where dark overtook him, with no pillow save his saddle — which is mighty uncomfortable even though it may sound picturesque to those who have not tried it. Bob grew daily more lugubrious, but Bud began to talk rather wildly of riding again to the Frying Pan, getting Butch Cassidy by the throat and choking the truth out of him — a reckless notion which appealed to him more and more as the fruitless quest continued. He began to imagine how it would seem to go galloping up the lane, meet Butch and lash out at him with biting words until they fought. A vengeful dream that grew upon him.

On this fifth day Bob had ridden early to the Basin for more food; the baked ham being no more than a wistful memory, the cookies likewise and

the four loaves of bread a dwindling, dried-out fragment. It was insufferably hot down in the canyon where he was dispiritedly searching the craggy walls for safe hiding places and thinking, among other things, that the country between Palmer's ranch and the Frying Pan held places of concealment for all the gold coin the world contains. Probably he was right. There surely was an ungodly amount of rough ledges and cliffs and heaped bowlders along the route indicated by the occasional hoofprints they identified as Butch's horse. In five days they had covered perhaps twice as many miles.

Off to the southwest a ragged blue-brown ridge of storm clouds crept slowly over the high peaks. A swashing rain would render their quest more hopeless still, for they would lose the tracks that now guided them sketchily from gully to bare ridge perhaps and into another canyon. The outlook was not cheerful, and the heat radiating from the rocks became unbearable.

It was then that Bud, climbing to a promising splinter of rock thrust upward like a crude needle from the broken ledge beneath it, sighted the cool, still pool sunk between banks of rock and gravel so that from the canyon floor it was invisible. Some sunken stream had risen there for a look at

the sky, perhaps. Bud gave a hoarse whoop, forgetting caution in his sudden joy, and immediately began to climb down as eagerly as if he had sighted the gold.

The frivolous buckskin had long since lost all desire for prancing or taking the steep hills in jackrabbit leaps. He stood half asleep in the shade of a rock, with trickles of sweat running down thigh and shoulder; a tamed horse that had learned to conserve his energy and put aside his play. Bud mounted and rode to the pool though it was almost within pistol range.

Side by side he and the buckskin drank their fill before Bud stripped and went into it in a long, clean dive from a rock thrust up into the sunshine and so hot it curled his toes with pain during the few seconds he stood there poised for the jump. The water was cold, the shock to his fevered skin a gorgeous sensation of sheer physical thrill. Bud went deep, tilted and shot to the surface and spouted happily, the cobwebs washed from his brain, the gnawing rancor from his soul. For the moment at least he was his normal, care-free self; hungry, but enjoying to the full this glorious swimming pool set apart from the haunts of men, passed by a dozen times or a hundred, perhaps, without discovery.

And then, swimming and diving, floating and treading water and splashing in pure devilment, he heard some one laugh; a chuckling sort of subdued cackle which Bud knew quite well. By treading water and craning his neck he could see the spot where he had left his clothes, and Butch was there, sitting with his knees drawn up and his ungloved hands clasped around them, smoking and grinning between puffs, with his hat pushed back on his head and the knot of his neckerchief askew under his ear — where he would maybe wear a knot of another kind one day, Bud thought balefully. Butch looked a very good sort of fellow, a pal perhaps who had no whim for a bath that day. But he was not at all like that when he spoke.

"Divin' for it, Bud?" he fleered. "Better claw around there on the bottom, why don't yuh? Gold sinks, yuh know; or don't yuh? I savvy you've had lots of schoolin', but that don't mean you got good sense. What time yuh expect Bob back with the grub? Oughta be showin' up, now, most any time. I heard him say when he left he'd git here b'fore three o'clock. It's way past that now, by the sun." He squinted upward, then spat reflectively toward the pool.

"Of course you'll stay and eat with us," Bud

invited urbanely. "Bob promised to bring some fresh eggs and a couple of chickens."

"Yeah, I know he did. I heard 'im." Butch's narrow, light blue eyes were studying Bud's black head, sleek as a wet muskrat, with some curiosity. He had expected a blasphemous series of epithets — and, fifteen minutes sooner, he probably would have heard them. He had not reckoned upon the steadying effect of that cold plunge.

"Then of course you'll stay." (Privately, Bud was certain that Butch was not to be shaken off before he had accomplished his purpose; and, frankly, Bud believed that murder was his purpose.)

"Might, seein' you insist. I'm purty well hooked up with grub, but my *kew*-seen don't include chicken. How yuh goin' to cook it, Bud?"

"Broil mine — and rub it with butter, salt and pepper now and then. How you want yours?"

"Sounds good t' me. I'll take the same."

To gain time for thought, Bud curved in his body and dived, expecting that he would come up to meet a .45 slug somewhere in his brain; between the eyes, he guessed — since Butch was called a good shot. As may be surmised, Bud did considerable thinking under water, but he could

not think of anything better than he was already doing, since his manner was puzzling Butch and what puzzled Butch Cassidy also worried him. Still, he might shoot, and there was just one way to find out. Bud came up, shook the water from his eyes and saw that Butch was apparently much interested in the pinned-back hatbrim.

"Where'd yuh make the raise, Bud? I been kinda curious about that pin."

Bud hesitated. There is a fiction that two men must never let a good woman's name pass between them, but there was nothing secret about the pin — except before Marge. Every cowpuncher who went to dances in that country should have recognized it.

"Grandma Parker's," he lied shortly, and dived again as if he enjoyed diving.

When he came up, Butch had laid aside the hat and was looking speculatively at Bud.

"'Course, I could shoot yuh," he mused aloud. "Lots a things I could do. S'pose it'll be a bullet. Ain't yuh about ready to come out? Bob'll likely be startin' supper 'bout now. Come awn — git into yore clothes." Butch spoke as he would have admonished a small boy.

Because there was nothing else that he could do Bud came out of the pool, nipping over the hot

gravel to where his clothes lay in a heap ten feet from where Butch sat smoking. Butch had moved while Bud was under water, and Bud's gun and belt had moved with him; also Bud's big clasp knife that was useful for so many things.

Bud dressed as unconcernedly as if the man sitting there in the shade had been Bob. Butch spun Bud's hat to him — without the cameo pin, — and eyed Bud sharply when he picked it up and looked at the flopping brim with the two blackened pinholes. Bud looked up at him, his eyes black with anger.

"Pretty small, Butch! I knew you were a thief, but I did have some respect for you for taking a chance, anyway. A stunt like this is so low-down you'd have to climb a ladder to scratch a snake on the belly!" He stared a moment longer and put on his hat. To move toward Butch would have been one way of committing suicide, and even in anger Bud was no fool.

"Yeah — one more reason why I'll kill yuh, Bud. Some day." Butch got up, dusting off his trousers with downward sweeps of his palms — close to his gun, Bud saw with a curl of the lip.

"Yes? Well, you'll have to go some unless you play safe and do it now."

"I'll be willin' t' go when the time comes," Butch retorted. "Move awn — my mouth's waterin' fer chicken."

They moved on, Bud in the lead. Lark's rifle, he saw, was gone from the saddle. A foolish thing he had done, and a costly, to go swimming in that pool as carelessly as if he were down in the Basin pasture. He could find no excuse for it in his belief that he had the hills to himself that day. After so long a time he and Bob had both come to the conclusion that Kid Kern was watching Butch so closely that there would be no attempt made at present to retrieve the loot, and that they were therefore perfectly safe to search where they would.

At Butch's command, Bud dismounted some distance from the spring where they had made a makeshift camp. They approached the place on foot and so came upon Bob when he was least looking for callers, the supposition being that Bud would search until close to sundown before coming to camp. It was Butch's casual tones that brought Bob facing them in blank astonishment.

"I got a gun ag'inst Bud's backbone," Butch announced in a cheerful, conversational manner. "He'll git it, right plumb through the liver, first

crooked move you make. Toss yore gun into the spring. It won't hurt the water none."

"Get him if you can, Bob," Bud countermanded. "Let the damned skunk shoot if he wants to; he will, anyway."

Bob looked at Bud, glanced over his shoulder into Butch's narrowed eyes, drew his gun and threw it into the spring with a muttered oath. Butch grinned.

"Got a knife? Throw that in too. All right, boys, let's go awn and have that chicken dinner. I an' Bud's been talkin' about it all the way over."

"'Better a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred thereby,'" Bud quoted under his breath with a grim humor not lost upon Butch, who overheard him.

"Nh-nh. This is goin' to be stalled chicken an' hatred thereby," he drawled. "An' I bet a dollar I'll hate harder 'n the both of yuh put t'gether. Wanta bet?"

The two ignored him and set about cooking their dinner, knowing that Butch would kill the man who made a hostile motion.

"Lessee. This is the first time you've had a fire sence you been down here," Butch observed pleasantly. "I'd a dropped in awn yuh b'fore,

but it looked like purty slim pickin's. Then this mornin' I heard Bob say chicken, so I plumb knowed you was goin' to have comp'ny fer dinner."

"Say-ay," drawled Bob, after further small talk of the sort, "I'd ruther be shot than talked t' death, Butch."

"Yeah — but I'd ruther talk," Butch grinned. "Pass over the pepper 'nd salt, will yuh, Bud?"

"Certainly," said Bud politely, though his eyes were murderous.

They ate and were filled, but two of the trio did not enjoy the meal. Butch persisted in desultory talk, friendly on the surface but with a sting beneath. Now and then Bob grunted, while Bud relapsed into absolute silence.

"Can't figure out no way that'll work, Bud," Butch told him impudently, when the three were smoking afterwards — Butch performing nonchantly the art of rolling and lighting a cigarette almost entirely with one hand. "Y' see, in the first place, I got yore guns. Y' won't jump me, so that lets you out. Anyway, I got t' be goin' in a minute. Main reason I give m'self an invite to supper was t' tell you fellers I'm shore tickled at the way yo're combin' these canyons. Y' see, I dunno but what yuh might run onto somethin'

way yo're goin' about it, you shore ain't leavin' no stones unturned.

"When you've crawled all over these hills, mebbe you'll believe what I told yuh over to the Fryin' Pan, Bud; that I never got no money over to Palmer's place. Still, I dunno. Yo're so damn' pig-headed you won't believe nothin' you don't want to. Well, go ahead an' look. Look yore damn' eyes out, fer all me. You won't find nothin'. An' don't fergit I'll be right there, close hand by, all the time. So-long — shore enjoyed that chicken!"

While he talked, Butch had backed toward the bushes that grew near. At the last moment he drew something from his shirt pocket, looked at it, gave a snort of scornful amusement and tossed the object so that it fell between Bud's feet. Then he disappeared.

Bud stooped, picked up the cameo pin and turned it absent-mindedly in his fingers. His sign of the Golden Arrow. The red blood of youth crept upward and dyed his cheeks at the thought of the ignominy he would have suffered had he been obliged to go and confess to Bonnie Prosser that he had lost her pin; that Butch Cassidy had taken it away from him! In the pressure of events since that day when he had ridden blithely

across the reservation with the cameo pin worn proudly above his forehead, he had not thought so much about it. He had fancied himself invulnerable to the young archer's barbed darts. Now — now he was suddenly aware of a great hunger, a longing that engulfed even his hatred for Butch.

"Hell!" said Bob, thinking of his gun lying at the bottom of the spring.

"Hunh?" said Bud, thinking that he had time in plenty to ride to Prosser's ranch before dark.

"Hell, you damn' fool!" Bob looked at him with his mouth drawn down at the corners like a child about to cry.

"Oh, sure," Bud agreed, without having the faintest idea of what had been said.

Bob's mouth opened, closed again very slowly. He was staring from Bud's face to the brooch in Bud's hand, and at the fingers softly caressing the carved face of the woman.

"Looks like her," said Bob with much sarcasm.

"A — a little." Bud's forefinger closed tenderly upon the profile.

"Say, come out of it!" growled Bob. "What about Butch?"

"Butch? Why, Butch will get killed if he crosses my trail again. Why?" Young Bud's eyes turned surprisedly toward Bob.

"Goin' to keep up the hunt, knowin' he's p'pared to jump us the minute we find it?"

"Why, sure! You don't think Butch cuts any figure with me, do you?" (Plenty of time — and he could get there before dark, if he hurried.)

"No — 'course he don't!" cried a mocking voice somewhere among the rocks.

Bud started, closed his fingers upon the brooch and turned toward the voice. The softness had left his eyes, which snapped with their old fire.

"You know it, Butch! You heard what I said." Strange how the flinging of that cameo pin at his feet brought Bonnie so vividly before him that even his quarrel with Butch seemed irrelevant, a matter of secondary importance.

Now he knew that the illuminating truth had come upon him at the pool when he picked up his hat and saw that the brooch was gone. It was like losing Bonnie herself — and of course he had always known, deep in his heart, that he meant never to lose Bonnie Prosser out of his life; that some day — but the time of easy assurance was past, and it had taken the rough hand of Butch Cassidy to tear away the film from his eyes, just as he had torn the pin from Bud's hat.

"See you later, Butch!" he called defiantly, and started on a run for his horse.

"Yeah—yo're damn' right!" Butch's mocking laughter followed him, echoed and was flung back again and again from the farther wall of the canyon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"DISARM THE PRISONER!"

"GOT your notebook handy, Marge?" Young Bud, looking altogether different, though not so handsome, in a tailored suit left over from college, and a new straw hat that gave no excuse for wearing cameo pins in the brim, crossed the lobby of Fort Benton's best hotel to where Marge was sitting beside Maw staring out at the shifting crowds with puckered brows, her thoughts no doubt dwelling upon picturesque effects. "This is Miss Bonnie Prosser, and I thought you might like to make a note of the fact that she is the high priestess in the temple where I worship; the goddess of the Golden Arrow, and—"

"For the love of Moses, what kinda talk is that, Bud Larkin? Bonnie's too sweet and pretty a girl to be made fun of right in public, like this. I been waitin' for a chance to git you two girls acquainted," cried Maw, from the depths of a leather rocking chair.

"Why—why—she's *exactly* like my heroine!" cried Marge, her eyes dancing with excite-

ment. "I wrote the sweetest love scene just before we left home —"

"Too late, too late," crowed Bud, his lips curving into the smile of a happy boy. "I beat you to it, Marge."

"Now, hush," drawled Bonnie, in a voice amazingly low and sweet and vibrant — just the voice one would want to hear from that smooth young throat and lips formed for laughter. "I'd love to be your heroine, Miss — may I call you Marge? I've so wanted a girl like you to come into the range country and give me a sympathetic ear now and then. Ever since I first heard about you I've been planning to come over and steal you. We live right next to the reservation, and there's the dearest old squaw I want you to write up. And I know so many places where I want to take you. When this trial is over, I want you to come home with me. We're going to be the best of friends. I always know, the moment I look at a person. Don't you?"

"Them girls don't need you, Buddy," Maw shrewdly observed. "Set down here where I can talk to you. Lean over here. Are you and Bonnie engaged?"

"Yes, ma'am," Bud confessed meekly. "Have been, Maw, for almost a month."

"Well, I ain't a mite su'prised, and I'm real glad. Set down, can't you? Let 'em alone till they get acquainted. I want to talk to you private. Now. What kinda luck did you have, Buddy? Are you goin' to be able to give that money back to Palmer — or the bank, or whoever it belongs to?"

All the joy went out of Bud's face. He shook his head, his lips pressed tight.

"Who told you, Maw?"

"Lark told me. Who else do you think? *You* wouldn't, I notice. I was so scared and worried when you stayed out in the hills like you did, Buddy, that I thought Lark oughta get you out of the country some way. I thought you was on the dodge for killin' them Palmer men, mebbe. So Lark told me what it was all about. Butch is in town, did you know it?"

Bud lifted his shoulders in a gesture of bitter defeat.

"I didn't know it, but I can't do anything, anyway. I saw Kid, and he told me he's been watching Butch and he hasn't got a thing on him. I'm certain Butch did it, but — Maw, there isn't a gopher hole between Palmer's and the Frying Pan that I haven't searched. Kid claims he combed the ranch too. If he turned up anything,

he's keeping it mighty quiet — but I don't believe he has. I think Butch has simply outguessed us."

"Well, don't you have no trouble with Butch. You didn't bring no gun, did you, Buddy?"

"Butch took my gun away from me when he caught me in swimming." His eyes evaded hers. "You heard about that, I suppose."

"Yes, I did — and I heard too that Butch give your gun and Lark's rifle to Kid, and had him send 'em over home. Bob took 'em back down to you, so you needn't to think you can lie to me, Buddy. Don't you pack that gun around this town, or you'll get yourself into trouble, sure. You think what that would mean to Bonnie. I'm real glad she's got some say in the matter now, Bud. She'll hold you down — I'm sure I can't!"

"What do you expect me to do if Butch makes a crack at me? Stand and take it?" Bud's eyes grew stubborn.

"Butch won't make no crack at you. Kid told Lark he'd had a talk with Butch, and Butch promised him faithful he'd keep his own side the road. He ain't goin' to crowd you, Buddy, and you mustn't go glowerin' around edgin' him up to a fight. Them eyes of yourn git terrible stormy

when you're all wrought up. You think about that nice girl and forget Butch."

"You dragged me away from two nice girls, Maw, and opened the disagreeable subject yourself."

"I know I did, but I was kinda lonesome for you, Bud. I ain't seen anything of you skurcely since that money was stole. Lark says Palmer's goin' to hold the bank responsible for it if it ain't returned. Palmer claims there was six thousand dollars, and he just as good as accused Delkin of takin' it himself. It'll likely come out at the trial. Lark says if the bank does have to stand good, he'll pay Delkin himself ruther than have 'em think—"

"And admit that Jelly and I took the money! I thought Lark had a little sense. Maw, if Lark does that, I'll choke the truth out of Butch Cassidy if I have to do it right under the judge's nose!"

"Now, now, Buddy, don't you go and git on your high horse again! You know as well as I do that Lark's soft-hearted as any old woman you ever saw. He can't bear to have Delkin feel—"

"Fine way to salve his feelings and sharpen his belief that Jelly and I are thieves! Where's Lark? I want to have a talk with him."

Maw stood up and looked around the lobby and sat down again with smug satisfaction.

"Lark ain't here. I dunno where he is, Bud. He was talkin' about ridin' out to some ranch or other to look at some cattle they wanted to sell. You wait and see how things works out at the trial. I heard some one sayin' the jury's most all chose, and the show'll commence in the mornin'. They say that Melrose feller that Palmer's got to keep him from gittin' hung is a wonder, Buddy. It's kinda s'spicioned around that he's got a pretty strong defense. I don't see how he can have. Can you?"

Bud brought his wandering glance from the two girls sitting in a corner with their heads together in confidential whisperings. He looked at Maw and cleared the impatience from his eyes. After all, who was more loyal than Maw?

"Palmer has an alibi, you know, and Bat Johnson and Ed White are conveniently gone where they can't turn State's evidence, even if they wanted to. A good lawyer can do wonders with a situation like that, Maw. Where's Lightfoot? He came with you, didn't he?"

Maw gave a sudden laugh that turned her new teeth sidewise in her mouth and necessitated some expert manipulations behind her handkerchief.

"Consarn them teeth! I've a good mind to throw 'em out the window. Lightfoot got right out of the hack as we was comin' from the depot and started in drawin' pitchers of that Injun camp up there on the hill. I wouldn't be a mite su'prised if the sheriff had to go up there after him when it comes his turn to testify in court. Buddy, you oughta take him over onto the rese've-tion some time. He never seen any Injuns in Smoky Ford — and I never told him why the Injuns all hate that place so. Thought I'd leave that to you. There! See that big, fine-lookin' man comin' across the street, Buddy? That's Palmer's lawyer. They say the county attorney would give a good deal to know what he's goin' to spring on 'em to-morrow. Here comes the girls. Ain't they pretty and sweet? I bet they're up to somethin', the way their eyes is dancin'!"

Arms twined around each other, schoolgirl fashion, the two girls came up and perched on either arm of Maw's great upholstered chair. That buried Maw from sight of everything, so they laughed and accepted the chairs Bud was placing for them. Bonnie leaned forward, took one of Maw's tiny hands in her own and patted it.

"What shall be done to punish a young man who tells lies to an innocent young lady from the

East? " she asked gravely. " I have just heard some awful whoppers which a certain person told Marge. And Marge," she said impressively, " is my best friend. I have heard about the Iowa frogs and —"

" I surrender." Bud interrupted her and threw both hands in the air.

Maw gave him a quick look, sucked in her teeth apprehensively as if she were afraid of losing them into her lap, and glanced at Bonnie's hand that had one finger extended and pointing like a gun at Bud.

" Yes, disarm the prisoner, Maw," said Bonnie. " I've got the drop."

Maw reached out and got the gun tucked inside Bud's waistband, where it had been hidden from sight; looked at it, blinking tears from her round eyes, and shoved it down beside her in the big chair.

" You may take down your arms and march ahead of us to that drug store on the corner. Two maidens in distress want lemon soda. Will you come, Maw? "

" No," said Maw in a voice that shook perceptibly, " I don't believe I will. You childern run along and — and have a good time! "

" Listen, Maw. We'll bring you some —

some—" Bonnie leaned and whispered in Maw's ear.

"Yes—yes—all right—yes-s—" Maw's hand closed convulsively over the gun.

"And thank the good Lord for that!" Maw breathed fervently, while she watched the three cross the street. "My, my, what turrible liars men do make of us women—keepin' 'em outa trouble." She got up, looked shyly around to see if any there observed her deformity, and waddled away to her room, the gun hidden in a fold of her skirt.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

SNOWBALL TESTIFIES

"My, my, are you getting all this down in shorthand?" Maw leaned over and whispered to Marge — being of course obliged to look up, as a child must do.

"No," Marge whispered back, "it's too tiresome. I'm only making a few notes of funny people here. The trial itself is commonplace; hopelessly commonplace. I never saw such a tame crowd — and to think it's right in the West!"

"Tame, did you say?" Bonnie, on the other side, had caught the word. "I wonder what you're used to, Marge." She glanced across to where Butch Cassidy stood leaning against the wall with his hat dangling from his left hand, his arms folded — with his right hand hidden, Bonnie observed — and she smiled to herself.

Those tame persons most concerned did not consider the trial a commonplace affair. Palmer's lawyer was earning his money, and Palmer had reached the point where he could lean back in his chair and look the jurymen in the eye — though

a close observer would have noticed that he avoided the judge's cold gaze. It had been proven beyond a doubt that Palmer had no visible connection with the murder and robbery. The facts so far as known were in his favor, and his testimony, given calmly under the adroit questioning of his counsel, brought to the attention of the jury many points which, though ruled out after sputters of argument between the lawyers, nevertheless carried their weight, just as was intended. Melrose was a clever man.

For instance, Palmer was not stopped before he had stated that he knew nothing whatever of the bank money being hidden on the ledge in his pasture. He had chosen to use a certain secluded niche in the rocks as a natural safe, he said. He had never placed much confidence in Delkin's bank and did not like to keep his last cent there. Something might happen. He had stored away six thousand dollars in powder kegs, just in case of need. He had not visited the place for a month. No, he did not go often to see if his money was safe. Nothing could bother it unless some one stole it, and he had felt sure that no one knew of the hiding place.

Yes, he understood that the bank's money and papers had been found there. He could not ac-

count for that, except that Bat Johnson and Ed White had discovered the place and had hidden the money there because it was the safest spot they could find. Well, although he had trusted them, he guessed if they knew he had six thousand dollars hidden away in there his life wouldn't be any too safe. He had no theory, except that if they were in a hurry they could have overlooked his money sacks. He admitted that was unlikely, and repeated that he believed he would have been killed if he had gone there before they removed the money.

Yes, he had been told that the money — his money — was gone. He thought that those who took away the bank money should be held responsible for his six thousand dollars. They may not have taken it, but they certainly knew it was there, whereas he had no idea that the bank's money had been secreted on his ranch in the very place where he had stored money of his own.

About the boat he was equally outspoken. The men had built a boat in which to cross the river, where there was a little feed and where stock occasionally drifted in to graze. Sometimes they mired in the mud while trying to drink; when the river was low that often happened. They had built the boat so that they could cross the river

and haul out mired stock. He had never dreamed that it might be used for a more sinister purpose, but he could see how that would be possible without his knowledge or approval.

On cross-examination he named approximately the date of his last visit to the ledge. He had decided to store away six thousand dollars as a nest egg that could tide him over if hard times came upon him. The last time he had gone there was in the middle of June, when he had taken five hundred dollars in gold and put it away with the rest. That amount just rounded out his six thousand, he said. There had been no occasion to go there after that.

"Ain't that old pelican the damnedest liar you ever seen, Bud?" Gelle whispered behind his hand — they having given their testimony and been dismissed. "Gilt-edged, though. He'll git away with it."

Bud nodded gloomily. He had been watching Butch Cassidy and wishing hotly that he had a gun. It began to look as though Butch was going to get away with something — ride off scot-free and leave a smirch on the good name of the Meadowlark that, in the minds of the Smoky Ford bank's officers, would be harder to erase than Macbeth's haunting blood stain.

Butch glanced at the two, his light eyes narrowing under frowning brows. It was evident that Butch also had something on his mind. Beside him Kid Kern leaned against the wall, careless on the surface, but never missing a look or a movement anywhere, and paying especial attention to Butch and Bud.

"Gosh!" Gelle ejaculated under his breath. "Pore old Snowball's goin' to be pumped dry now — and he don't know a darned thing about nothin'."

"Character witness, maybe," Bud made ironical reply.

"It'll be a pippin," Gelle predicted. "Snowball don't know nothin' good about that old coot."

Sam rolled his eyes in mental anguish, probably imagining that he himself was being accused of something. He stuttered and didn't know anything he was expected to know. He was palpably terrified, and whenever he caught Palmer's eyes upon him he shrank pitiably in his chair. And then, mercifully, his wild eyes strayed to Gelle's face and clung there as to his savior. He blinked, swallowed twice, gripped the chair arms and began to talk — to his beloved "Mist' Meddalahk", who had given him human sympathy and a dollar. A question or two he answered intel-

ligibly. Then, abruptly, his tongue-tied fear dropped from him.

"Yessuh, yessuh, Ah doan' know nuthin' 'bout no doin's mah boss he been up to. Boss, he want his dinnah awn time — dass all ole Sam consuhmed about.

"But one mawnin', 'long about noon, heah come dem Meddalahk boys ridin' and shootin'. Yessuh, Ah 'member what tooken place awn dat day. Considubble, suh, happens right 'long 'bout dat same time. Mist' Meddalahk, he come ridin' along, aftuh boss he go awn to town. Yessuh, boys dey calls 'im Jelly, but Ah doan' see nothin' respeckful 'bout names lak dat. Ah calls 'im Mist' Meddalahk, an' we talks along an' talks along, 'bout one thing an' anuthah — yessuh.

"Mist' Jedge, suh, Ah got somethin' awn mah min' don' consuhn yo'all. Ah been hearin' little sum'fin now an' ag'in 'bout some money what come up missin', and 'pears lak some gemmen, dey 'clined to think mah frien', Mist' Meddalahk ovah theah, he done mebby *took* dat money. Ah doan' rightly know jes' how dat come about, Mist' Jedge, suh, but Ah'd lak fo' to tell yo'all —"

"I object, your honor, on the ground that the witness is taking up valuable time to no purpose," cried Palmer's counsel, springing to his feet.

"Your honor, this witness is incompetent—"

"This witness is trying to tell what he knows about some missing money," the judge rebuked. "Objection overruled. Go on, Sam. Tell us all about it. Plenty of time, so long as we get the truth."

"Yessuh, Mist' Jedge, dat what Ah'm comin' to right now. Mist' Jedge, it come about 'count of ole Blinkah. He go wand'in' off an' Ah hunts him up, 'cause sometime he jes' go to sleep 'mos' anywhere. Mist' Meddalahk, he bin gone fuh some time, an' Blinkah, he gone fuh some time, and Ah jes' starts off lookin' fuh Blinkah. Yessuh, Mist' Jedge, Ah'm lookin' for Blinkah.

"Time Ah gits down pas' de stable, Mist' Jedge, I seen fo', five men walkin' crost cow paschuh. Mist' Meddalahk, he's one, Mist' Delkin, he's one, Mist' Bud, he's one—looks lak mebby Blinkah he down thah an' mebby sick uh somepin'. So Ah goes awn down, Mist' Jedge, an'—an' awnes', Mist' Jedge, Ah doan' mean no hahm!

"Ah goes along in some bushes, lak, an' Ah watches t' see what all's takin' place, 'cause if it's Blinkah an' he's daid, ole Sam he ain't gwine be dah—no, suh! So, Jedge, 'clah to goodness, dem white folks dey diggin' aroun' an' talkin'

'bout *money*. Ah crope along, an' crope along, but Ah doan' see all dat money — no, suh. Ah waits, an' dey pack off all dey wants, an' Mist' Delkin, he say he leave wha's left.

"Mist' Jedge, Ah been luhned not to wast *nothin'*. Boss, he mighty p'tic'lah 'bout wastin' *nothin'*. Dey takes all dey wants, Jedge, and den Ah goes an' looks, and 'clah t' goodness, Ah seen *gol'* money lef' right dah! Mus' be fo' five dollahs. Ah — Ah tuk it, Mist' Jedge. Ah got it in mah baid, upstairs. Cawdin' t' what Ah huhd, Mist' Jedge, dat money consuhms mah friend, Mist' Meddalahk."

"Whoo-*eee!*" yipped Gelle, before he could stop himself, and caught the stern yet understanding eye of the judge and subsided, red to collar and hair line.

"That's the first dramatic moment I've seen since I came West," Marge confided to Bonnie, who was biting her under lip and staring straight before her, to where Bud's head had lifted and turned, his eyes seeking hers. Bonnie's eyes were bright and her lashes were wet, and she did not hear a word of what Marge was saying.

The sheriff was mumbling that there would be a recess of ten minutes. Bonnie stood up, helping Maw into the aisle. She was going to Bud. It

was almost as if Bud had been cleared of some criminal charge — as if he had been the prisoner before the bar. But when she had taken a step or two down the aisle, Bonnie stopped, a queer little sound in her throat that may have been a laugh or a sob, or both. She turned and caught Maw by the arms and lifted.

"Stand on the seat, Maw, and look over there! He's going straight to Butch — to beg his pardon. Oh, isn't that the most splendid thing you ever saw?"

Maw, up on the seat, looked in the wrong direction and never knew it, because her eyes were so full of tears she could not have seen Bud anyway.

"Yes, it's grand," she quavered. "Larkie and Bud are good boys —"

"Say, Maw," Lark leaned over her shoulder to shout, "that coon's goin' to spend the rest of his days at the Meddalark and help you cook. Darn his black hide — and Butch too. He ast me fer a job and I turned him down cold. Lemme past, will yuh, Bonnie? I want to ketch him b'fore he gits outside. My Jonah, about the worst thing can happen a feller is to be accused of somethin' he ain't guilty of. Hey, Butch! Butch! Bud! You 'n' Butch come awn over here! These

wimmin has got me penned up here like a pet calf!"

"Moses, what a jam!" quaked Maw, when a dozen persons in her immediate vicinity began milling aimlessly in the aisle. "Larkie, I just hope Palmer gits let out. I don't believe any man on earth would lie like that under oath and all, and if he was tellin' the truth, he ain't no more guilty than I be."

"I don't think he is guilty at all," Marge complained. "I came clear up here to see a man sentenced to be hanged by the neck — oh, where? That handsome fellow over there? Lynched! Was he really? I wonder if some one can introduce him to me. Lark, will you —"

"Oh, Maw," cried Lark into the babel, "we got a new lark to set and chirp on our bough. Butch is goin' to start in quick as we git back."

"I'm real glad," said Maw, grinning vacantly with her teeth comfortably reposing in her pocket. "I wisht, Larkie, you could find somethin' for that poor old Blinker to do. Seems a shame — they say Palmer's bargainin' already t' sell out an' leave the country quick as they let him go —"

"Well," young Bud's voice rose cheerfully above the clamor, "Butch, you and I will have to go swimming first chance we get. How about it?"

"Gosh, let's *all* go," cried Gelle exuberantly.

"Me, I'll take mine in good ole Metropole," Bob pushed up and confided in Gelle's ear. "They say it's a cinch, now, that Palmer'll be cleared. Guess the old coot's got it comin'."

"Well, I'm real glad," Maw repeated. "It would be awful, wouldn't it, to think little Skookum's grandpa was a murderer? I guess they's good in all of us if it only gets a chance."

"Come on, girls — and that means you, too, Maw. It's all over now but the shouting, and I'm too dry to shout. Let's round up Lightfoot, and all go hunt that drug store. What do you say?"

"I say that means you want to get Bonnie out of here," Marge retorted. "I'd rather go with the other boys and Maw. I want to ask Butch a lot of questions, anyway."

"Ask me, little pilgress, why don't you? I could answer more questions a minute — if you asked 'em — than you could ask Butch in a year."

"Oh, all right. I don't think Butch heard me, anyway. Come on, Maw."

At the steps, Bud and Bonnie looked back and saw them coming; smiled and nodded, caught a warning scowl from Gelle and decided they would not wait.

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